



BLACK MOON RISING

FRANKIE ROSE

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In the early twenty-fourth century, mankind took to the stars. There are few records documenting what drove them to leave their home planet, but the wanderers who ventured beyond their solar system flourished. Countless colonies were established on countless habitable planets. Soon, the human race could barely remember their origins.

They encountered alien races much like their own, as well as many life forms that were vastly different. Humankind evolved, just as it always evolved, and soon every outposts developed cultures and physical traits that contrasted and complimented each other, creating a rich, diverse tapestry amongst the galaxy.

The Commonwealth of Planets was forged to maintain peace and civility amongst all races. A thousand years of prosperity and harmony followed, where humans and other life forms lived alongside one another, unified by their core beliefs.

Corruption poisons even the calmest waters, though. Whisperings of war began to circulate. A group of planetary leaders formed an alliance of their own, and deemed the free will of the people to be dangerous. And so the Construct was born. Their forces grew like a wildfire, their technology

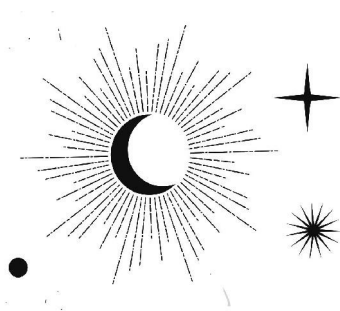
advancing by the minute, and soon the
Commonwealth was forced to disband, it's leaders
executed, it's people kidnapped and integrated into
the Construct army.

There are few who refused to bow down to the
Construct, though.

There are still those who will not bend the
knee.

There are still those fighting for equality,
liberty and independence.

You just need to know where to find them.



PROLOGUE

REZA

His fingers are inside me, and I can't quite catch my breath. His mouth is on mine—hot, demanding, inescapable—and my head is swimming all over the place. He breaks off the kiss, the briefest of reprieves, and I gasp in a breath of air, my lungs burning like crazy.

Gods...

Gods, it's happening again...

I wasn't awake when he came for me. I never am. It always takes place exactly like this: I'm asleep, dreaming, and then my body feels like it's rising, floating to the surface from the bottom of very deep water. There's no panic. No sound. No fear. It's as though I'm being gently cradled and lifted from some dark, nameless place, until I breach the surface of reality, and there he is, waiting for me. Always waiting: the man with the dark hair and the burning, golden eyes.

His skin is hot against mine, hard and smooth, like warmed marble. His breath stutters from his mouth, very uneven as I run my hands over the taut muscles of his back. He's strong and powerful, commanding every inch of me.

Here, in these hushed, dark moments we share, our bodies connect and combine in the most unbelievable way. He is a sun, and I am a moon. He is the dusk, and I am the dawn.

His touch lingers and burns at my skin. Biting

down hard on my bottom lip, he tugs at my flesh, then flicks it with his tongue. “Your heart’s racing.” His voice is a whisper, caressing the sensitive bare skin of my neck. “You eat. You breathe, You work. You sleep. You trick yourself into thinking your days are full, and you enjoy your existence. This is when you’re most alive, though, Reza. Here, in my arms.”

He can see inside me, and he can hear my thoughts. Here, with his hands on my body, his tongue working over the tightened bud of my nipple, strands of his long, dark hair skating over my skin, making me break out into goose bumps, I can’t hide anything from him. I can’t bring myself to admit that he’s right, though. That would be dangerous. My soul won’t allow it, because I know who he is, and I know what he’s done. He’s a beautiful, savage, cruel thing, and he’s going to be the death of me one of these days.

He withdraws his fingers from inside me and places them one by one into his mouth, licking them clean. His eyes flash with bursts of gold, so bright they look unnatural—one moment they’re as dark as pitch, the next they’re lit up like a flaring sun. He runs his tongue along his bottom lip once he’s done with his fingers, as if he’s savoring the taste of me. “You want me,” he whispers.

“I don’t. I can’t.” My protests sound weak and unconvincing, even to me. We’ve been here before.

We've quarrelled this out many times. The moral, principled part of me knows that wanting him is wrong. That part of me has never been the victor in this situation, though. I always give in. I always let him have me, because I want him just as badly. He's the only thing I'm afraid of in this universe, and he's the only thing I need more than the blood that runs through my veins—the cruellest, most painful cosmic joke ever conceived.

Dipping down, he kisses my collarbone, and his hair smells fresh and clean. Somehow, he smells like the cold. He smells like winter. "You want to scream. You want to hit me. You want me to leave. You want to hate me," he says softly. "But you can't, Reza, because you know I love you. You know I'd never hurt you."

Some people call him King of Lies. Some people say he'd be physically incapable of telling the truth, even if he wanted to. I know better, though. Jass Beylar is honest to a fault, and more often than not he's usually right. That's what makes him so perilous. I can feel his affection for me, even as I sense the other warring, dark, sinister emotions inside him, vying for his attention. And I know he would never hurt me. The only thing he values more than his own life is mine.

"You need to stop this," I tell him. "You need to stop doing this to us. We're tearing each other apart."

Jass' eyes glint. He strokes my hair back behind my ear, and then runs his fingers over my cheekbone and down, along the line of my jaw. I shiver as his fingers move lower, circling my nipple. "I only come here when you call out to me," he says. "I never come without invitation. If you want this to stop..." He smiles, a raw, scandalous smile that makes my stomach pitch. "If you want this to stop, you have to stop asking me to come here."

"I've never asked you to come here."

His teeth graze my neck, lightly at first and then harder, making me hiss at the brief stab of pain. He pulls back, taking hold of my right wrist first, then my left, pinning both my arms high over my head. My back arches, causing my breasts to rub against his chest. A burst of adrenalin fires through me, circling around my body, burning between my legs, and I can barely take it anymore. I want him. I want him inside me so fucking badly. His need for me is obvious; his dick is rock solid, pressing up against my belly. I angle my hips up without thinking, and Jass grinds his teeth together.

The deep, low rumble of his voice in my ear makes my toes curl. "There's a tether between us, Reza. A connection I don't understand yet. You can feel it, I know you can. Sometimes, whether you're aware of it or not, you pull on that tether. You draw

me to you. I'll never deny that request. Just as you'll never deny the pleasure I give to you. You want me inside you. You want to feel me inside you when your climax takes you. You want to feel me getting harder and harder, until I can't take it anymore and I come. Admit it. Tell me the truth."

"I—" I can't let the words out of my mouth. It's pointless trying to hold them back, but I try, just as I try every time he comes to me. "I don't want—" Gods, this is difficult. My breathing is out of control, ragged, loud even to me. I'm panting, my vision blurred, and I can barely form a single coherent thought. My desire clouds everything. Jass dips down, hovering over me, supporting his weight on his elbows. I can't wrestle my arms free from him...not that I'm even trying.

"I'm going to fuck you, Reza. You can make me leave, if that's what you want. You can force me off you. Hurt me. Deny me. This is your chance. But if you don't, I'm going to fuck you, and I'm going to make you come until you scream my goddamn name. Make your decision."

I will hurt him. I will deny him. I will make him leave. Only, when I open my mouth, nothing comes out of it. He stares down at me for a long, drawn out, never-ending moment, and the lust in his eyes nearly sends me spiralling down into the depths of madness. He is the night bringer. He is the doom and destruction of an entire galaxy. And yet my

heart is fused with his, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I offer myself up to him. My legs fall open, and the man with the golden eyes grins wickedly. He releases my hands, groaning as he thrusts himself into me, and a wave of pleasure crashes over me like a violent storm wave battering against a rocky shore.

"Gods, Jass!" I dig my fingernails into his back, and he bares his teeth, thrusting into me once more. I can't get enough of him. The flat planes of muscle that make up his chest and stomach all shift and tense as he moves, and I'm hypnotized by him. He's perfection. There isn't a line of his body that is out of place, and I can't stop myself from watching him as he fucks me. My heart's hammering out a frantic drumbeat, my ears ringing. Jass bows himself over me, and his mouth finds mine. His tongue is in my mouth, laving at me, gently tracing the line of my lips. He tastes strangely sweet—like a small citrus candy my parents used to give me when I was small, back before they died.

Now isn't the time to be thinking of my parents, though. I push them out of my mind, just as Jass pushes himself into me again. And again, and again. His arms are tensed, his biceps straining, and I dig my fingers into him there, too. I bite down on his pec, and he snarls under his

breath. The vibration of the sound rattles inside my head as he pushes himself deep inside me—as deep as he possibly can. He’s rough, but he knows when to stop. He knows where the line in the sand has been drawn, and he never crosses it. It walks me to it, threatens to obliterate it, but he always stops. He pushes enough to thrill me, then pulls back.

“You’re mine, Reza. You’re mine to fuck, and mine to keep,” Jass rumbles into my ear. He gathers up a handful of my hair and winds it around his fist, drawing my head back with a sharp tug. “Our souls are joined. Our fates are aligned. It doesn’t matter where we go, we’ll always find one another. Now come for me,” he growls. “I want to feel it. Soak me. I want to feel you all over me.”

I can’t resist him. Not with him inside me, looking down on me like I’m the galaxy’s most prized creation. And he knows how to fuck me. He knows how to make me writhe and twist beneath him. He promised he would fuck me until I was screaming his name, and I give him what he wants. I buck and moan as my orgasm rips through me, turning my vision red. I scream until my throat feels raw, and there is no oxygen left in my lungs.

“Jass! Gods, Jass, I’m coming!”

“I’m going to come, too,” he whispers. I cling to him, pulling him into me, rocking my hips up to

meet his, and he shudders as he climaxes, a roar of pleasure echoing around the inside of my head. We're both breathless and covered in sweat when he lowers himself down on top of me, resting his head on my chest.

His fingertips stroke my skin, making patterns, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. He is so...other. I have no words to describe him. Curling his dark, thick, wavy hair around my index finger, I study him intensely. He really is beautiful. Handsome in a way that makes it hard for me to concentrate.

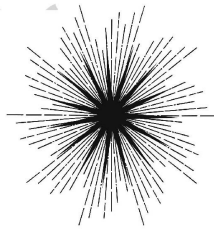
Murderer.

Assassin.

Puppet.

He is all of these things, but he is so much more.

I allow myself to drift back down into the silent waters of unconsciousness, knowing I won't remember this when I wake. I savor him for as long as I can before everything fades and vanishes. I make sure to breathe him in until the scent of winter fresh mornings and cold snow disintegrates, and I'm alone in my bed once more.



ONE
NO PLACE DARK ENOUGH
REZA

I'd rather die than be a member of the Construct.

I decided this when I was seven cycles old, three cycles after the Construct laid waste to my home planet and murdered my mother and my father. Murdered everyone I knew or had ever known. I was taken and shoved into an orphanage on an outpost planet in the middle of nowhere, left to rot with thirty or forty other children until I reached what the Construct Elders termed a 'useful age.' That's when they came back for me. That was the first time I tried to kill myself.

I thought I had everything figured out when I was seven. It was better to drown myself at the bottom of a hyper chamber than it was to learn the Construct's almighty code. To be strapped to a chair and forced to watch clip after clip of burning bodies, stars exploding and lights falling out of the sky over and over again until I was a malleable, pliable piece of meat that would do whatever it was told, whenever it was told to do it.

Suffice it to say, I did not succeed in ending my own life. I was found. I was saved. I was strapped to the damn chair anyway.

Their conditioning stuck for a little while. I learned the Construct's way, barked out their dictum every time it was required of me: *One Life. One Duty. One Construct.* My voice was hoarse from it by the time I collapsed into my hard cot each night. I didn't mind, though. They'd beaten the minding straight out of me.

Then: puberty. The Construct hates puberty. That Molotov cocktail of hormones is enough to send any child crazy—even a child who's been brain washed. Once more, their coding started to make no sense. Why was it necessary to cleanse the disruptive? Why was sterilization of the masses for the good of us all? I didn't want to murder families in their beds. I didn't want to raze entire cities to the ground.

I tried to kill myself again when I was thirteen. I took the wickedly sharp blade that came as part of my service uniform and I laid it against my wrists. The flow of blood seemed catastrophic. Again, they stopped me. Again, they saved me. That was the first time I saw *him*: Jass Beylar, the boy with the wild, wavy hair, and the dark, soulful eyes. I'd heard of him, of course. Everyone had. The Construct found him alone on an abandoned planet, living amongst the ruins of an ancient city, billions

of cycles old. No one could figure out how he had come to be there by himself. No one could understand how he had survived without any supplies or proper shelter, for...well, no one knew exactly how long he'd even been there. They'd asked. They'd tortured him. They'd used every trick imaginable, and yet Jass never gave them the information they sought. His mind was a vault, and the Construct leaders simply didn't have the combination to open it.

After a while, rumors began to spread around the ship. The Construct was training Jass, training him in a way few others were trained, and he was responding.

He'd been on the *Invictus* for a little over a cycle when he found me dying on the metal grate flooring of division eight, where I'd been assigned purging duties. I'd been smarter that time. I'd locked the door, barricaded myself in, but that hadn't mattered in the end. Back then I'd had no idea how he'd found me. I didn't know about the link between us. I was too far gone to really know what was happening as the metal chairs and desks I'd stacked up well over my head toppled over Jass bullied his way into the room.

I remember his dark hair. His perfectly formed mouth, pulled into a tight line. His eyes, dark and bottomless, and how I felt like I was falling when I looked up into them. He picked me up off the

ground. He ordered me not to die. They told me I imagined that part, though. They told me he didn't speak.

He must have been seventeen then. Four cycles older than me in his body, but light cycles older in his mind. I didn't see him up close again until I was eighteen—the final day I spent on the star ship *Invictus*.

“Tell me about that last day, Reza. Tell me again about what happened with Jass Beylar.” Across from me in the rusting metal shack I now call home, Seer Darius sits with a nylon mesh mask covering his face. This is the way of the seers when they venture to the surface; they have sensitive eyes. Ever since I found my way to Pirius, the seers have grilled me endlessly about Jass. I don't know why they bother. They're telepaths. They can see inside my head as well as I can see the suns overhead or the rolling sand dunes spreading out for miles and miles in every direction around us.

I shrug. “It was like any other day until it wasn't. We were on our way to the Keptan system. The Elders were planning on cleansing a small M-class planet called Darax. As far as the Construct was aware, the inhabitants of Darax were poor. No real wealth. No real technology. They assumed their work would be done quickly and they could resume their initial mission.”

“Which was?”

“Repairs to another Construct vessel that had been damaged.”

“Damaged by whom?”

“Pirates. A marauder group. They weren’t sure. They were furious about the attack, though.”

Darius drinks from his beaten water canteen, pressing the lip of the metal receptacle up to his mouth through the nylon mesh. “And when you arrived at Darax?”

“The Invictus was barely in range before a barrage of missiles were launched from the planet’s surface. They hadn’t anticipated an attack. The Invictus was a large ship. It couldn’t maneuver quickly at close quarters with such little notice. We sustained critical damage to nearly every sector.”

“And what did you do during the unfolding chaos?”

“I seized my opportunity. I ran for the hangar bays and I climbed into one of the emergency escape pods. The Construct soldiers were fleeing in droves. That’s when I saw Jass.” My palms are sweating. I hate recounting this story. Every time I do, I somehow feel complicit with him. Like we’re connected in the eyes of the seers, one way or another, and they’re expecting me to lead him here to end them all. Darius is the most mild mannered of the seers, though. If I have to tell this story again, the words so repetitive and familiar now that they’ve become rote, I’d prefer to be telling him.

Darius places his water canteen on the ground, in between his worn, dust covered boots, and he spreads his hands out in front of him. “What did he do, child?”

“He...he ran into the hangar. He didn’t seem like he was looking for an escape route, but it was hard to tell. He seemed like he was looking for something. Everything was moving very quickly. Alarms were sounding all over the ship. One of the generals was shooting at other Construct soldiers, putting them down one by one.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Stryker was a madman. He tried to stop me from getting into an escape pod when I ran into the hangar, but I grabbed a cutting torch from the floor. I slashed him with it across his face. He was furious as a dying sun. Maybe his rage lead him to it.”

Outside, an eerie howling sound cuts in between the low moaning of the wind. Grains of sand *ting* against the corroding walls of the shelter. Darius ignores the call of the dune dog and the approaching storm, waiting silently for me to continue. So I do. “I was panicked. It took a while to figure out how to initiate the pod’s emergency launch protocol. When I looked up through the pod’s view port, Jass was standing on the opposite side of the hangar, absolutely still. He was facing me. I was filled with...an immediate sense of...I don’t know what to call it. Dread? Fear? I hit the

launch controls and strapped myself in. The panic subsided for a second when the pod ejected and began to move through the hangar, heading out into space, but then the pod just stopped. No matter what I pressed, it remained hovering in the air. Other pods were ejecting and departing without a problem, but mine was stuck.

“I looked out of the pod display again and I saw Jass, standing closer now. People were running all around him, mad and afraid, but none of them hit him. It was as though he was magnetized and he repelled them. People flowed around him like water flows around a rock, not touching him, not disturbing him. His right hand was raised in the air, his palm aimed directly at me, and...and it seemed as though his whole body was shaking. My pod was frozen in space because of him. I knew he was able to affect things with his mind, but I had no idea he would be able to stop a pod.

“General Stryker eventually noticed what Jass was doing. He marched over and spoke with him. It seemed as though Jass was ignoring him at first, but eventually he slowly lowered his hand. I felt...”

Darius tips his head to one side, a little further than a normal human being might. “What did you feel, child?”

This part is always the hardest. What I experienced in that moment, when Jass released his hold on my pod, still confuses me to this day. It

scares me. “I felt like he was trying to communicate with me somehow. I felt like he was trying to get inside my head.”

“And did you allow him in?”

“No. There was an intense pressure, and I had this...*sense* of him. It was terrifying. I pushed against the pressure. It grew for a second, and then...it was just *gone*.”

Darius and the other seers have never seemed interested in what happened after that moment. They took my pod apart piece by piece when I arrived here on Pirius, so they have all the telemetry reports. They know the pod bypassed seven inhabitable planets before it arrived here. I was trapped inside for twelve days with barely any survival rations. I had no means of controlling the shuttle, no technical understanding of how to set a course, so I just sat there, freaking out until the power read out began flashing manically and alarms began sounding. For the first time an alert flashed up on screen inside the pod, asking if I wanted to take emergency measures in order to reach the closest planet with a stable environment before oxygen supplies were diminished, and I hit the big green flashing *YES* button. I crash landed on Pirius two hours later, sustaining three broken ribs and a concussion that made me black out at random intervals for three days afterward.

Darius nods, seeming to process the

information I've told him. Outside, the dune dog howls again, closer now, this time followed by another, longer, more melancholy howl. Darius should be going soon if he wants to make it back to the sub city before the sand storm hits, but he doesn't move from his position perched on the edge of my one and only wooden stool. Instead, he looks up at me, his clouded eyes just visible through his mesh mask.

"Have you ever felt that pressure again, Reza? In the seven cycles you've been here on our planet, have you ever experienced that same feeling inside your mind?"

My stomach turns over. I don't like lying to my friend. I *do* feel that same sensation inside my head. All the time. It's more than that now—a connection of sorts, linking me to Jass. It's *always* there, so ingrained in me that it seems as though it's an integral part of me. Telling Darius that won't get me anywhere, though. It'll get me kicked off the planet, and what then? "No," I say, shaking my head. "I haven't."

Darius straightens up, shifting with meticulously slow, considered movements. Collecting his canteen and his leather satchel, he packs his water away and slides the bag's strap over his head. He sighs heavily, making his way toward the tattered cloth covering the entrance into my home. Sand swirls inside, billowing over the

previously swept floor, shoring up against the base of my footlocker. “I know I’ve been asking these same questions of you for a long time now, child, and I apologize for that,” he says over his shoulder. “You see, I’m afraid I haven’t been very honest with you. My people can glimpse into another’s mind. We can normally see visions of the future, but...ever since *you* landed here, none of us have been able to see a thing. We haven’t been able to confirm the truth behind your story, because we cannot reach inside your mind. Our cues from the future have all but disappeared. You’re an enigma. Your presence here on our planet has upset our abilities. You’re a bright light, blinding all of those who stand too close to you. And even if we did still have access to our gifts, Reza, we would never use them on you without your consent. Like Jass Beylar, your mind is locked from the inside. Unlike the Construct, *we* have never been in the business of trying to prise locks open against their will.”

Guilt seeps into me, taking root. “If that’s the case, if I’m the reason why your visions have left you, then why haven’t you made me leave? Why have you allowed to let me stay here all this time?”

Darius smiles. “Before you arrived here, a small part of your future was witnessed,” he continues. “Chancellor Pakka saw you here during a time of need for us. A time we would need your help. Sending you away would have been counter

to the future she saw. Chancellor Pakka also saw that you and Jass...*you are one and the same.*”

A jolt of dread hammers through me. “I’m sorry? The same? I don’t think so.”

“The same energy that runs through Jass’ veins also runs through yours. You can feel it when you close your eyes, Reza. You know it exists there, dormant and sleeping.”

I revolt against the idea. It can’t be true. No way in seven hells. A part of me is paralyzed, though. I *do* possess an inexplicable energy. I can feel it swirling through my veins, every moment of every day. It’s been there for as long as I can remember, and it’s gotten stronger ever since I fled the Invictus. Is there even the smallest possibility that...?

No.

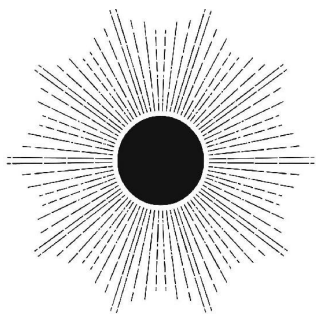
No. Darius is wrong. That’s all there is to it.

The seer leans against the wall of my tin shack, smiling flatly behind his mesh mask. “Don’t be afraid, Reza,” he says. “People only need fear things they don’t understand. With our help, you’ll understand the gift you’ve been given. You’ll learn how to control it, just as Jass has. We’ll help you master yourself, and in return for our assistance, you will help us.”

An icy chill settles over my bones. “Help you with what?”

“We need Jass away from the Construct. He’s

on his way here to find you, Reza, and we need to keep him here. For good.”



TWO JASS FIGHTER

Trying *not* to read someone's mind is like trying not to poke at a broken tooth. The desire to explore it, feel its contours, test out the limits of the pain associated with it, is next to impossible. And besides, denying yourself something so satisfying is just, well...pointless. Much better to just do it and get it out of the way. Much easier to go into someone's mind and simply pluck out the information you seek instead of wasting hours torturing it out of them. I tried explaining this to a girl once. She misunderstood me, though. She angled her pretty head to one side, blinked her owlsh brown eyes at me, and said, "You think it's better to ask for forgiveness than for permission?"

I admit I was disappointed. Up until that moment, it had seemed like we were on the same page. She understood how intoxicating power was.

She said she knew how it could make you feel liberated, high, drunk on the rawness of it. She said she knew how difficult it would be to turn your back on it, so why even try? And then she went and said that and ruined everything.

I'd leaned forward, pressing my forehead up against the glass that separated us, and sighed, stabbing the point of my gloved index finger against the coarse material of the black Construct uniform covering my thigh. "No," I'd told her. "I do *not* think that's better. I do *not* ask for permission. I do *not* ask for forgiveness. What would be the purpose?"

I heard later that Stryker ordered the girl be purged from one of the airlocks on the port side of the ship. That she'd been asking for me before they bundled her through the interlocking metal doors and hit the big red button that signaled her demise.

If she hadn't have asked that stupid question, I might have experienced remorse that I hadn't been there to say goodbye. As it stood, I was glad the girl was gone. No more pretty head. No more owlish brown eyes. I was free to focus on my work once more, to gather more power and cover myself in glory, and so that's exactly what I did. They trained me to within an inch of my life. They equipped me with the necessary skills to survive anywhere in this galaxy, and then they handed me the reins. They gave me dominion over a research post. At least

that's what they called it. In truth, Archimedes is a prison world where Construct scientists conduct some of the most brutal and horrific testing ever recorded. I haven't been back there in weeks, though. The place is too maudlin, even for me.

The doors behind me swing open, groaning loudly, and a foot soldier enters the old chapel where I've taken refuge. "You've been summoned, Lieutenant." he informs me, saluting me stiffly.

No one in The Nexus is religious anymore. Gods and idols are a thing the past. A long forgotten past. People have no comprehension of a higher power, which is just as the Construct wishes it to be. *They* are the only deity anyone need fear. *They* are the only super power to be obeyed. Seven cycles ago, the people of this planet, Darax, launched an attack on The Invictus, critically damaging it. I was in charge of punishing the people of Darax for their audacity. When The Nexus, the largest Construct base ever conceived or built, landed here in the wake of the attack, I found this chapel amongst the rubble. I've spent a considerable amount of time here since then, reading every form of scripture and dogmatic text I can lay my hands on in its dusty library. I find the information fascinating. It's bewildering to understand how an enlightened race could believe in such a vast array of conflicting and patently ridiculous hearsay.

“By whom?” I ask the foot soldier, collecting up my leather gloves. My ability is somehow channeled through my hands. Not wearing the gloves feels like I’m being set free most of the time, but when I’m around others, it can be quite... overwhelming.

“Governor Regis. He has someone he wishes you to interrogate.”

“Someone?”

“A Commonwealth fighter. He was found wandering out in the flatlands. He was dehydrated and delirious, but now he’s recovered enough for questioning.”

I was enjoying my relative solitude in the chapel. Sometimes I like to close my eyes and listen to the voices of the thousands of people who once stood inside these walls and sent up words of prayer to their benevolent creator. Their fervent hopes and desires were strong enough to color the very foundations of the ancient building, and now they play back on a loop, like an echo, if only you know how to listen for them.

I would love to tell this soldier I have another prior engagement to attend to and I couldn’t possibly bow to Regis’s demands, but I owe Regis a debt. And it’s not as though he can simply go and find someone else to complete this task for him. I have a very unique talent, after all. No one else can do what I do. Not a single person in the entire

fleet.

“Tell him I’m on my way.”

“Yes, sir.” The soldier leaves, and I’m alone with my thousands of ghosts once more. My gloves creak as I squeeze the leather, closing my eyes so I can concentrate. Where is she? Somewhere out there, amongst the chaos and the rubble, and the twisted, skeletal remains of this system, Reza’s alive and well. I’d know if she were dead. I’d sense a kind of *otherness* that didn’t belong. It’s been seven cycles since she escaped, and there hasn’t been a single day since that I haven’t opened my mind up to the powerful ebb and flow of energies in this universe, trying to find her. Occasionally, I’ll sense something, like a misplaced word on the tip of your tongue, and I’ll be able to feel her out there. I’ll know somehow if she’s working or if she’s sleeping or if she’s simply just existing in her own way. Very infrequently, I’ll get a sense of her mood, like a snatch of music suddenly bursting through speakers you had thought long dead, and I’ll know how she’s feeling. Such a strange experience. She seems happy a lot of the time. It’s only at night, when her guard’s down, that she reaches back down our connection in search of *me*. I know she can’t remember our little meetings when she’s conscious, but still. I wonder if I’m on her mind when she wakes up? I wonder if she thinks about my hands on her body, and feels

conflicted? I wonder if she craves me, the way I crave her?

On the command deck, Regis is waiting for me with a young man, who's bent double at the waist and bleeding from the nose. Regis looks disgusted, as he usually does, and the young man looks like he's about to shit his pants. He appears to be in his late twenties, and yet when he lifts his eyes to look at me as I approach I see that he's lived a thousand lifetimes. When you're hiding all the time, fighting for your very right to breathe air, every morning when you wake, you begin a whole new existence borne of suffering. It makes you old before your time.

The Commonwealth fighter tries to shift back, fear forming in his eyes when he sees me, but Regis beckons a foot soldier to take him out at the knees. The man hits the deck hard, crying out in pain.

"We've been waiting for you," Regis says.

"I came immediately."

Governor Regis, tall and severe looking like most Construct commanders, gives me a look that says he doesn't believe me for a second. Pity he can't read my mind and prove I'm lying.

Back when the Construct found me and told me they planned on training me to become their weapon, I was made to sign an agreement that stated I would never use my ability to see inside the minds of my superiors. A piece of paper is a piece

of paper, though. Nothing more. There's no way for them to know if I do or I don't dip my toes into their minds, so I do it all the time. I'm excellent at shielding my feelings, no matter what information I may trip over as I stroll through *their* thoughts and feelings. Regis has a stronger mind than most, though. He practices strengthening his mental defenses on a daily basis. Walking into Stryker's mind is like entering through an open door. With Regis, I have to climb a few fences.

"He knows something," Regis says, flicking his hand at the fighter. "Get it out of him before he bleeds to death." He marches out of the room, followed by three armed guards, leaving only two behind. As soon as the doors close behind Regis, I turn to the remaining men and stare at them. My eyes sear into their skin.

"Should...we go, sir?" one of them asks.

I don't reply. I continue to stare until they slowly begin to back away, and then hurry out of the room.

"That's a neat trick," the fighter says, groaning. He spits blood out onto the metal grating. "Moody teenager wins staring contest. Frightens off armed men. Classic, really. I'll make sure to tell everyone about that when I get home."

"I'm not a teenager. And what makes you think you're going home?" My voice is flat and even.

The fighter laughs, wheezes, and then coughs in pain. More blood onto the metal grating. “Oh, trust me. I wouldn’t normally give myself very good odds in this situation. I was told very specifically about what was going to happen today, though, and the story ended with me back in my own bed, busted up and bleeding but very much alive.”

“And you’re prone to believing *stories*?”

“Only when they’re from a seer.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. Cold, scathing, unfeeling. I walk over to the view port, looking out at the heavy mantle of space that stretches on and on forever, not really seeing the stars that interrupt the darkness. “There are no more seers, fool. They were wiped out cycles ago. The galaxy’s free of such foolish nonsense now.”

The fighter doesn’t say anything. I turn away from the window and move to stand over him, already itching to take my gloves off. The guy looks up at me, and the fear I saw there when I arrived has now evaporated. It’s infuriating to say the least.

“They said you’d say that,” he tells me, smiling a little. His teeth are red with his own blood. When the last time I shed blood? A strange question—one that I can’t seem to recall the answer to. “They said you wouldn’t listen to me, but that you’d know the truth soon enough.”

“Oh? And how did this seer of yours say that would come about? I’d just decide to take you at your word?”

The fighter shakes his head. He looks down at my hands and pauses for a moment. Then says, “You take off those gloves, and you look inside me. They said it was going to hurt. They said I was going to scream. But in the end, you would see the truth. And you would see...*her*.”

Electricity floods my nerve endings, relaying adrenalin around my body, faster than light. “*Her*?”

The fighter just smiles another bloody smile.

“I can make it painless,” I say. “If I feel so inclined. Tell me who you’re talking about, and I’ll be kind.”

“They said you’d say that, too. They told me not to bother, Jass Beylar. They said you’d make it hurt no matter what.”

I consider him for a moment—his ripped clothes and his obviously broken nose. The defiant light in his eye, and the courage pouring off him. I could have been him, I suppose, once upon a time. If the Construct hadn’t found me. If they hadn’t drip-fed me Light until I was addicted to it, so I couldn’t go a single day without it. I could have been a Commonwealth fighter.

Curiosity gets the better of me. “What’s your name?”

He just shakes his head. “What’s the point in

asking? You know I'm only going to lie. You know you'll pull my real name out of me in a second anyway. This all seems so...*futile*."

His logic stirs anger deep inside me; I'm not used to my prisoners being this calm. I'm used to them begging for their lives. Pleading. Bargaining with what little they have to make the process a little less unpleasant. Not this fighter, though. No. He believes without a doubt that he will survive this ordeal. He really does think he will be back in his own bed tonight, recovering from his injuries, hurting but otherwise unmolested.

Well, he's wrong. I aim on showing him just how wrong he is.

I take off my left glove first, and then my right. The fighter's eyes widen, but he doesn't shrink away. "Take a deep breath, then, stranger," I tell him. "And hold it while we become acquainted."

He screams.

The sound of his agony echoes down countless halls, ringing off the walls of the cold, sterile base, and I get what I am looking for.

Name: Col Pakka.

Home planet: Pirius.

His mission here: Find Jass Beylar.

I let him go, reeling.

Me? I am his mission. I saw it clearly in his mind. His mission, the reason he *allowed* himself to be captured and brought to the base, was because

he needed to get to *me*. Col, the fighter, looks up at me through wincing, watering eyes and smiles.

“You probably won’t believe this, either,” he says. “But the seer told me we were going to be friends. Good friends.” He shakes his head, breathing heavily. “Even I’m having trouble swallowing that one.”

I don’t respond. I place my hands on him again, needing to see more. Needing to find the glitch in his memories, his knowledge, that will suggest his mind has been tampered with in some way. There is no glitch, though. There’s no fault in his memories. Everything stored within his head is real.

The seer in the long robes, telling him of this precise moment.

The guards, taking Col and bringing him right here, to me.

And her.

And her.

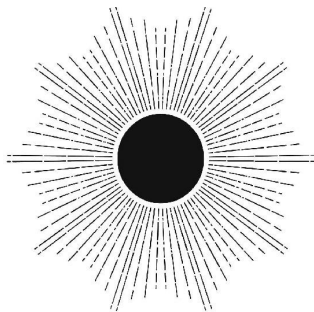
And her.

He’s seen her. Long brown hair, tied back into a complexity of knots and braids.

Dark eyes filled with determination and fire.

Her lips, blushed and parted. Her brow, creased in confusion.

It’s Reza.



THREE

JASS

RAPTOR

I've never had to steal anything in the time I've been a member of the Construct. Not one thing. The clothes on my back. The food that's put in front of me every day. The Light in my veins. Any vice or desire I wish to feed is catered to without question or complaint. It feels strange to be rifling through supply shelves and throwing things into a black combat sack.

I want to kill the man standing behind me, heaving and coughing up blood every five seconds, but I can't. I saw it in his head: there's only one way to find Reza and that's through him.

Pirius. I've heard of it. A huge planet. A desolate nightmare. Beneath all of the sand that covers every last square click of the planet's

surface, the mantle of the planet's crust is a honeycomb, a maze of old volcanic tubes back from when the place was still volatile young, fiery thing. It's a nowhere planet. Unimportant and worthless. We thought it was abandoned centuries ago. The Construct haven't exactly spent a lot of time mapping out the place. This Col guy doesn't know where the girl is himself. He only knows where to meet one these purported seers, who will then lead him back to her. If I show up without Col, the seer kills himself before I can get any information out of him. If I show up and Col is even remotely close to death, I'm shit out of luck.

Col groans, clutching at his stomach. "I don't understand why you want to find her so badly in the first place," he mutters. "What does the Construct want with her? She's just a girl."

I bite my tongue. I don't know this man. No matter what he says, we're never going to be friends; the very thought of such a thing is preposterous. I don't owe him an explanation for my actions. More over, I don't need to tell him that the Construct doesn't even know Reza still exists. She cost Stryker an eye. Scarred him for life. They'd put me to death if they knew she'd been alive all this time and I hadn't shared that information with them. They'd do even worse if they knew that I wasn't planning on bringing her back to the base as soon as I lay my hands on her,

too. At least, I don't think I am. I don't know what I'm going to do. She's like me. Of all the people in this godforsaken galaxy, she is the only person I've ever looked in the eye and recognized in some way. When we're together in our dreams, she consumes me. My blood burns in my goddamn veins for her. I have to find her; that's all I know.

"Have you met her? Do you know her?" I ask.

Col bobs his head from one side to the other.

"Yeah. We're friends. She's been on my planet for a long time now. She's..." He appears to think about his next choice of words. "She's quiet. Pretty. She keeps to herself. Before the seers moved her anticipation of *your* arrival, she lived alone on the planet's surface. Why?"

"None of your business."

"Ouch." Col scratches at the back of his neck.

"I guess the broody front matches your attire well. Black boots. Black pants. Black cape. I mean, *a* cape? Isn't that a little impractical? Doesn't it get in the way when you're fighting?"

Swiftly, I spin on my heel and grab him by the throat, thrusting him up into the air, slamming his back against the wall. Col gurgles as I choke him, squeezing the air right out of his lungs. "Okay... point...taken," he rasps. I release him, letting him go so that he slides down the wall and crumples into a heap on the floor. I go back to grabbing everything I'll need for a couple of days on Pirius.

“I guess in hindsight it does flare rather dramatically,” Col says.

“Shut up.”

“Sorry. I just mean, the theatrics of a floor-length cape... it’s hard to pull off.”

I clench my hand into a fist at my side, focusing a ring of energy around Col’s neck. I don’t even need to touch him to close off his oxygen supply. He can surely feel the pressure building around his esophagus as I grind my teeth together.

“*Shut. Up.*”

“Okay, okay. Shutting up,” he mumbles.

I have enough food for a few days now. Clothes and a coarse blanket, too. There’s only one more thing I need to collect before we can leave, and we aren’t going to find it here in the supply store. We need to visit my quarters before we can go.

I’ve managed to control my need for Light, I only take it once every three days, but the doctors in the med center don’t know that. They think they still dose me every day. Regis monitors my addiction constantly, keeping tabs on how much I take and when. It serves me to have him think I lean more heavily on the drug than I really do, so I alter the doctor’s memories, along with the records they keep. I show up every morning, pretend to take my dose, stash the vial of clear liquid, and then I leave. I never take the Light in the med center.

Never. For twenty to thirty minutes after I dose, I'm vulnerable. The way the Light affects me... nothing can compare. My mind wanders to places and planets unknown to me. I'm filled with power, I'm perhaps at my strongest during that time, but I'm also incapable of reigning myself in. I'm volatile, emotional, and liable to outbursts of violence that even I recognize are wild and uncontrollable.

I always dose in the privacy of my own quarters. The vials of Light I don't take are stashed there, hidden in a small box beside my bed. How many have I hoarded now? Twenty? Thirty? I can survive for three months with the supply I have saved, which is more than enough. I plan on being gone two days. Three at the most.

"Come with me," I growl, slinging the combat bag over my shoulder. "And keep up. If anyone sees you bleeding in the hallways, they're going to want to know why you aren't dead yet."

Col grunts as he gets to his feet. "If you haven't noticed, I'm kind of injured."

"If *you* haven't noticed, you're in the middle of an enemy base and you're surrounded by thousands of Construct guards, not commonly known for their mercy. Regis told me to kill you. We have to leave before someone realizes I haven't followed orders and decides to take matters into their own hands."

I hurry out of the supply store, walking briskly in the direction of my quarters. Col follows behind me; he doesn't complain again, but I can feel how much pain he is in. It's rolling off him like smoke from a fire. His discomfort crowds my head as I make my way through the narrow, angular corridors. He remains quiet as we pass one bank of guards and then another.

The cells are down a level, in an entirely different area of The Nexus, so there's no reason for me to be dragging Col around here. None of the guards question me, though. I have a reputation, after all. I just made a big deal about Regis's men wanting to know what I'm doing with Col, but they're not really that stupid. They don't want their necks snapped or their spines shattered, so they let us pass without comment.

My room is below sixty degrees, just how I like it. Col shivers as I usher him inside and force him to sit in the low-slung chair at the side of my bed. "Damn, it's freezing in here," he groans, his teeth chattering together for effect. "I heard you were cold-blooded but this is crazy."

There's no point sniping back at his jibe. It's a waste of time verbally sparring with him, I know that, but it's tough to keep my mouth shut all the same. The vials of Light are in a small wooden box by the side of my bed. It's in plain sight; the box opens for no one but me so there's no risk in

leaving it out. I place the box into the combat bag, and then I open my storage locker and start throwing clothes into the bag as well.

“Got anything white in there?” Col asks. Facetious bastard. He can see everything inside the locker is black. I continue gathering shirts and pants, grinding my teeth together.

A moment passes. Then another. Col’s desperate to say something. I can feel his need burning off him, making him glow like a signal flare. Finally, he spits it out. “Pirius is a desert planet, y’know. Hot. Sunny outlook, twenty-eight hours a day, nine days a week. You’ve seen it for yourself inside my mind. How do you propose to hike across a desert in thick black military gear?”

This man knows nothing of the training I’ve endured. The blisteringly hot uninhabited planets I was airdropped onto and told to somehow make it back alive. It was adapt and survive, or die. Pirius’ surface temperature isn’t even half as warm as any of those planets. I’ll be just fine in my thick black military clothing; I won’t even break a sweat.

“Your concern for my wellbeing is touching, but I’m going to have to ask you once again to keep quiet. I’m trying to think.” My mind is racing. I can’t quite seem to still it long enough to figure out what I’m doing. I’m acting rashly, I’m aware of that, but I can’t stop myself. This pull I feel, this urgent drive flooding my body...it won’t be

ignored. It's consuming me even more than my need for the Light I've just packed into the bag.

I expect Col to continue talking, but mercifully he keeps quiet. I gather up the few remaining things I need, and then I turn and head out of my quarters without saying a word. Col follows after me, still clutching at his ribs and his stomach, his boots making loud squeaking sounds as he stumbles along behind me, trying to keep up. We make it to the hangars, and my raptor is right where I left it, at the end of the closest line of crafts. The sleek black outer hull of the ship glints and gleams under the stark overhead lighting as I hurry toward it, refusing to even glance in the direction of the group of flight deck mechanics sitting around a table a hundred feet away, playing cards. Col, lurching along next to me, raises a hand and grimaces at them, giving them a wave. I hit him in the arm, just below his shoulder. Hard. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you want to die?"

Col yelps, rolling out his shoulder. "I already know I'm not going to," he says. "It's been seen. So why the hell shouldn't I fuck with those guys? And with *you*, for that matter."

I place my bare hand over the raptor's access panel and the door soundlessly slides back. I step inside the ship, dumping the combat bag in the storage bin to the rear of the vessel. Col steps into the ship after me, and his eyes momentarily light

up, the pain on his face disappearing. He whistles as he spins around, taking in the control panel and the state of the art comms units in the back. “Hell’s teeth. Talk about fancy. You really are daddy’s favorite, aren’t you?”

“Sit down and strap yourself in,” I command, stabbing my finger at one of the rear seats. “We don’t have clearance to leave. As soon as I power up the engines, the flight crew will know something’s up. We’re going to have to scramble.”

“You’ll need a co-pilot, then,” Col says.

Sitting down at the helm, I turn my head and glare at him. He must feel my displeasure crawling all over his skin. “I will *not*.”

Col sits down in the seat beside me anyway, clipping his harness into place, wincing as he twists and turns his body. “You don’t have many friends, do you?” he asks breezily. “Your blinding wit and charm probably intimidates people, I’m sure.”

On the outskirts of my mind, I sense something—a wrinkle. A potential problem, yet to develop. I close my eyes, casting my mind out further, stretching across the expanse of The Nexus, and I locate the source of my hesitation: Stryker. Shit. He’s thinking about me. Thinking dangerous thoughts. Someone’s told him I took Col up to my quarters. He knows something’s wrong. I hit the ignition on the raptor’s control panel and the engines roar into life, creating eddies of pressure

that buffet the craft behind us, forcing it to roll back. We have to get out of here, and now.

“Hey! Hey! Lieutenant Beylar! Stop!” One of the mechanics runs toward the raptor, waving his hands in the air, a panicked look on his face.

“Lieutenant Beylar! Kill your engines! You’re going to destroy the surrounding craft!” He yells his warning out to me, frantic, as though I’m unaware of what will happen if I start my ship here on the hangar floor instead of having it deployed from the launch bay. The craft behind me slams into the hangar wall, it’s nose crumpling as the pressure from my jets grinds it against a support pillar.

Chaos explodes on the hangar deck.

Everything happens at once. The mechanic in front of the raptor draws his gun; the hangar doors swing back and a unit of soldiers run in, their weapons already primed and butted up against their shoulders, aimed at the raptor. The soldiers don’t waste any time once they’re inside the hangar. They head straight for us, their visors flashing red for high alert. Next to me, Col begins to look a little nervous. “Your boss has unleashed the hounds. Might I suggest we get the hell out of here? Like, *now?*”

A caustic response would be perfectly timed right now, but before I can say anything, the intercom on the control panel buzzes and Stryker’s voice floods the cockpit. “Where do you think

you're going with that prisoner, Jass?"

I've never liked Stryker. I don't like anyone on The Nexus—friendships aren't encouraged here, and even if they were everyone's too afraid of me to get close—but I especially despise him. The man was put in charge of my training by the Order of the Elders, and ever since he's made it his personal mission to make me miserable, keep me chained and compliant. He encouraged Regis to put me on the Light so he could control me like a dog, and I will never forgive him for that.

"I'm investigating intel. This man's mind revealed a terrorist cell located close by. I'm going to use him to gain access to the group." This is almost true. If there are seers out there on Pirius, they would be considered terrorists of the most highest order by the Construct. I would be sent to flush them out anyway. Stryker doesn't sound convinced by my explanation, though.

"There are procedures in place for this kind of thing. You do not go off on your own, hunting down ghosts, without my explicit command. We need to send a team to handle this cell. Power down your raptor and join me in the control tower immediately."

I should probably do as he says. It will be really hard for me to return to the ship if I leave under these circumstances. At the same time, though, what does that matter? I'm sick of being

the Construct's plaything. I am sick of being barked at and ordered around like a common serf. Maybe coming back wouldn't be the best idea, anyway.

"I'm sorry. I think this situation is better handled on my own. Sending a large team down onto the planet will only alert the cell. They'll run as soon as they see Construct cruisers in the sky. I'm just one man. I'll be able to infiltrate them and destroy them from the inside."

"Unacceptable, Beylar. Power down your craft immediately. I won't tell you aga—"

I hit the button above the radio, silencing it before Stryker can finish his sentence. I already know what he'll say: threats, threats, and more threats. The man's fond of the sound of his own voice, and nothing is more satisfying to him than promising to make my existence cripplingly difficult.

"I thought you'd be better at lying," Col says, punching the coordinates for Pirius into the raptor. I run the information through a scrambler so neither Regis or Stryker can have the data pulled from the ship's record. The raptor rises incrementally from the ground, spinning on its axis so it's facing the launch port on the starboard side of the ship. A little loft. A little more.

I tilt the Raptor's nose down and push the throttle forward, sending the fighter class craft surging out toward open space. I hit at least three of

the other grounded fighters sitting on the flight deck, damaging them beyond repair. Stryker's so damn proud of his fighter fleet; the fact that I've destroyed some of his most prized possessions isn't going to temper his anger any. I've disobeyed him. I've disregarded his direct orders. I've taken a prisoner, and I'm breaking free of The Nexus. All treasonous offences worthy of execution. In the space of less than an hour, I've alienated the Construct, abandoned my post, and essentially gone rogue.

Up ahead, the launch port's doors have been activated and they're beginning to slide closed. It takes momentum to get doors like that opened and closed, though. They're huge—the entire width and height of The Nexus. That's a hell of a lot of metal. They're not even half closed by the time I navigate the raptor through them. A series of high pitched squeals and squawks blast out of the radio's speakers on the dash board, making Col nearly jump out of his skin. I've been expecting the abrasive sounds, though—notifications from the ship's on-board computer that someone's trying to hack into the raptor's controls. Standard Construct procedure: disable and destroy. Governor Regis will be screaming at his men on in the control tower right now, demanding they paralyze my ship, to stop me, cut me off from my engines, so I'm floating free out there in space. They won't be able

to do it, though.

I haven't prepared for this. I had no idea I'd react this way upon hearing news of the girl. I'm a smart guy, though. I knew there would come a time when I'd have to make a sharp exit from The Nexus. I took precautions. I made sure I'd be able to forge a clear exit for myself. The raptor's loaded with tech advances Regis never authorized. I'm sure he told his engineers to pull my ship apart piece by tiny piece, to check up on my activities, but those guys knew better than to walk within fifteen feet of the machine. They knew all too well what I'd do to them if I found them interfering with my ride.

We clear the launch port, and I don't waste any time. I pull the ship's nose up, and I gun it. I won't have much of a head start. Construct fighters are faster than most ships in the galaxy. I helped design them myself. I know what they're capable of, and I know their flaws. If I can put a click or two between the raptor and the fighters who come after us, I'll be able to enter the Darax asteroid belt and it will all be over from there. The raptor can turn and pivot on command, instantaneously changing direction at the touch of a control. The fighters aren't that nimble. Their engines aren't capable of an immediate stop, which makes dancing through an unpredictable asteroid belt a suicide mission. Regis would never risk losing ships inside the vast,

rocky stretch of debris. No way.

I make the raptor's thrusters scream. Beside me, Col Pakka turns a ghostly shade of white, his knuckles blanched and bloodless as he grips at the harness holding him in his seat. "Holy shit. You're a maniac," he gasps.

I ignore him. I'm waiting, straining to hear the telltale pitch and whine of Construct fighters on my comm as they come roaring out of the base's launch port. Any second now...

Regis' top men run drills and train endlessly for situations like this. In fact, it's all they really do. They're finely tuned, well-honed weapons, and they know the consequences that will befall them should they displease Regis. They can make it into their crafts and are deployed and out in open space in no more than a minute—quite a feat for upwards of thirty vessels, all taking off at once. I don't hear anything on the comm, though. I grind my teeth together as I push the raptor even harder, my heart thundering out of control behind my ribcage.

Any second now...

Any second now...

Any...second...now...

But there's no sound from my dash's radio at all. No pitch and whine. No excited chatter, distorted through full-face helmets. There is only the endless, black, bottomless silence of space.

I almost hit the first piece of debris we

encounter—a fist-sized chunk of material, probably a combination of iron and nickel. I’m not paying attention, and I don’t see it until the raptor’s alarms urgently warning me of the imminent danger. I roll the raptor, scrubbing off a little speed, and Col starts screaming. He grips hold of the control panel with one hand, clutching at his broken ribs with the other. “You’re insane! I never should have listened to that seer. I should have stayed at home this morning. I never should have gotten out of bed.”

If I had the time, I’d probably hit the passenger eject button and dispose of him, but I don’t. I suddenly find myself spiraling through a sea of debris, dodging this way and that, my hands moving of their own accord across the raptor’s controls. I shut my mind down. I shut it down, and yet I open it up at the same time. I release the tight control I maintain over myself, and I allow the inquisitive fingers that form in my head to expand and stretch, reaching out, exploring the space around us. My mind processes the debris field, locating each and every piece of rock, asteroid, and space dust, noting its position, trajectory, and potential for damage to the ship. Once it’s done all of that—in barely more than a tenth of a second—I adjust the Raptor’s course with lightning precision. Just as Regis’ soldiers have trained and trained under the master’s watchful eye, I have been training for this, too. Regis would never have sanctioned my

obsessive, relentless training. His paranoia and general distrust of me has always made him cautious of arming me with skills beyond what he considered reasonable. If he knew I could do this? If he knew my mind was capable of such feats, he would have ejected *me* out of a space lock without a moment's hesitation a long time ago.

Col rounds on me, his eyes wide, his knuckles only getting whiter as he holds onto the control panel for dear life. "What the *hell*?" he gasps. "This...this is *not* possible."

He's referring to the agile, nimble movements of the raptor as I pick and twist our way through the asteroid field at high speed. He's never seen anything like this before. Neither a vessel capable of such complex aerial displays, nor a man capable of controlling it. The galaxy is a broad, seemingly endless place, and yet the same laws of physics apply no matter where your ship is docked. Unless you can learn to bend those laws a little, of course. As far as I'm aware, I'm the only person, living or dead, who's been able to accomplish such a thing.

Col balks as I spin the raptor into another a roll, successfully avoiding two large chunks of ice that are locked on a collision course. I hear the nervous hiss of breath escape him as the monolithic, jagged blue projectiles impact with one another, shattering into a million pieces, bombarding the raptor with spears of frozen

nitrogen.

“Outer hull compromised. Outer hull breach detected.” The on-board computer calmly announces the significant danger with little to no urgency. Col shrieks at the top of his lungs, his skin ashen and drawn. So annoying. Do I have time to knock him out? This situation is developing fast. If I don’t focus all of my attention on avoiding further damage to the ship, we’ll both be floating around out there in the void, suitless, bloodless, lifeless, and his over-the-top reactions won’t matter any more. So no. I don’t have time to knock him out. I perform some rapid mental calculations, searching for the quickest, safest way out of the asteroid field. I hunt for the route that provides the highest probability of survival. Fifteen percent. Twelve percent. Thirty-nine percent. Twenty-seven percent. Fifty-one percent.

There. Fifty-one percent? Better than a coin toss, by a hair’s breadth. I’ll take it. Spinning the raptor to the right, I point its nose down and I flip it, causing Col to screech again. “You’d better know what you’re doing,” he yells. “Because right now, it really feels like you don’t know what you’re doing!”

I know *exactly* what I’m doing. The raptor rockets through the asteroid field, shaking with the effort of maneuvering so quickly at such high speeds. I allow myself a small smile as I jerk the

craft to the left and then to the right, avoiding another two large asteroids, each a hundred feet across. I haven't fully anticipated the roll of the one on the right, though. The gap between the two masses closes unexpectedly; I have to punch it to make it through on time.

Col hollers, screwing his eyes shut. I can't afford the luxury of closing mine and hoping for the best. I grit my teeth, willing the two asteroids to remain separated. Using my mind to pick up a person or a small object is one thing. The asteroids, thousands of tons of solid rock, are another entirely. A bead of sweat trickles down my forehead as I strain to maintain the gap. I manage it, barely, but the strain takes its toll. I'm panting as the raptor tears through the gap, barely a few feet on either side of its wingspan.

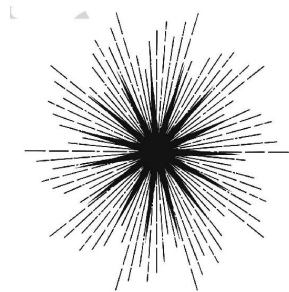
And then...

We're clear.

Free, open space. Stars stretching on and on, uninterrupted, for an eternity.

The raptor ceases to rattle so violently, settling onto a smooth flight path. It takes a second or two for Col to realize we aren't dead. When he does, he whoops, almost bouncing out of his chair, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Holy shit! Holy *shit*! I can't believe..." He shakes his head, as if the action will somehow help him make sense of what just happened. "How? How did you *do* that?"

I stare grimly straight ahead, my jaw still locked, my eyes fixed on the uncertain darkness ahead. “Better you ask how the stars keep burning,” I whisper. “Better you ask how the universe keeps expanding. The answers are easier to comprehend.”



FOUR

REZA

BLACK MOON / PALE MOON

I can't sit still. The very cells that make up my body won't stop vibrating, creating complete and utter chaos inside my body. I've always felt this uneasy discord within myself, never finding a true moment's peace, but now with every passing second, it feels as if my body is revolting against me, trying to warn me. Urging me to run. The seers' sub city is much like the rest of the settlements on Pirius: a network of underground tunnels and passageways that all twist and turn, interconnecting and diverging over many miles, protected from the persistent sand storms that buffer the planet's surface. I'm one of only a few who choose to live above ground, taking my chances against the erratic, unpredictable weather patterns. My home has been swept away countless times, my lungs

burnt from the hot desert particles that snake their way up my nose and down my throat every time I take a breath. I'd rather that than the feeling of being trapped and buried in the claustrophobic maze the seers and Commonwealth fighters have sought safety within for centuries, though. And when I *have* ventured down into the sub city, I've always made the people restless and uncomfortable. Living apart from them seemed like a kindness.

Darius lumbers slowly through the passageway ahead of me, seemingly unfazed by the close quarters. He was born down here, and he'll undoubtedly die down here, too. Every few feet, a small light flares in the dark, throwing off a dim circle of white light—enough to navigate by, but not enough to dispel the shadows that fester in every corner. The seers aren't used to bright light, hence the mesh mask they wear whenever they come topside. Down here, Darius has removed his mask, revealing the series of spiny ridges that mark his high forehead. Beside his overly long fingers, and his dark, deep-set eyes, those ridges are the only things that mark him as non-human. Other Pirians have a shock of silvery hair, but for as long as I've known him Darius has kept his head closely shaved.

“Your quarters are comfortable, Reza. Closer to the surface than most. I believe there's a window

that can be opened and closed when required. I'd ask you that you don't try and leave the sub city through it, however. Danger's approaching. You won't be safe out there. It was seen a long time ago, before we lost our abilities."

I've never asked too many questions of Darius. Never asked how the seers' visions of the future work. I only know that the glimpses of the future they normally catch are nearly always one hundred percent correct, with very little room for deviation. In fact, I believe a seer has only been wrong on a handful of occasions, and each time has been a major cause of unrest amongst their people. To find out that none of them have received any visions at all since I crashed here...well, it's rather troubling.

I lift my bag higher on my shoulder, swallowing down my discomfort. It feels like the walls are breathing down here, drawing closer. "I won't try and leave. If what you're saying is true and Jass Beylar is on his way to Pirius, I don't want to be out there on my own." I shudder at the mere thought of it. My last encounter with the man left me traumatized for weeks. Months, even. I still wake up at night, sweating, riddled with fear, feeling as though he was just looking inside my head. That he was just with me somehow.

"The days ahead are uncertain," Darius muses quietly. "Chancellor Pakka received many visions of this time before we lost our sight completely, but

there are many who don't trust in visions that are so old. The Construct will try and end us all. You are like a lens, Reza. A black, polished lens we can neither see through or around. You conceal the timeline of our future and shield it from us."

"Could it be that Jass *isn't* coming here anymore, then?"

Darius makes a repetitive clicking sound at the back of his throat. Odd. Erie. "Someone's with him right now. We sent Col to retrieve him and guide him here, so we will meet him on our own terms. Plus, Chancellor Pakka can still see Jass. The merest suggestion of him. His life flickers in and out of view, distorted by your lens. It is like staring into deep water, child. When the water is calm, the bottom of the ocean floor may be seen. The sand. The creatures living within the water. But when the water is no longer calm, stirred up by a ferocious whirlpool, the sand clouds the water. The depths of the waters are lost to us, and nothing can be made out amongst the turmoil. There are troubled times approaching. Very troubled times indeed. The power that explodes forth into the universe when you and Jass Beylar meet in the same location, at the same time, could be catastrophic. For you. For him. For every living creature in this galaxy."

A wave of nausea twists in the pit of my stomach. I've felt like I'm in the middle of horrific waking dream ever since Darius told me I was to

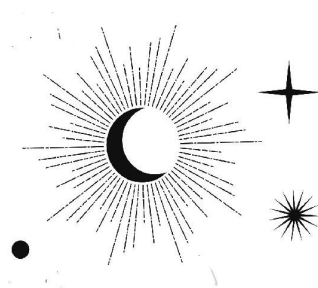
accompany him to the sub city, and that feeling is only growing worse by the second.

“I don’t need to be able to read your mind to know what you’re thinking, child,” Darius says. “Any fool would be thinking the same, and you are no fool. You’re wondering why we would have our man bring Jass here, when we could choose to try and redirect the fate of the galaxy.” He pauses, humming softly under his breath, as if he’s reconsidering this entire course of action himself. Then he says, “It is not our place to try and redirect a stone once it has started rolling down a hill. Even in such dire situations as these. Terrible things can only come of it. And there is a chance...” He trails off. The swishing of his long robes against the bare dirt floor fills the narrow, tight corridor—the only sound to stem the silence, bar the hammer and thrum of my crazed heartbeat slamming in my own ears. My pulse must surely be loud enough for Darius to hear it, too. I try to tamp down the fear rising upward from my boots, but it’s impossible.

“There is a chance of what?”

He doesn’t reply for a second. And then a second longer. Then, “There’s a chance, always a chance, that the surge in power that arises from the strange connection between you and Jass could be used for good. To prevent the devastation that will spread across our system, and every other system, within the next hundred cycles. Jass Beylar is a

black moon hovering over the horizon, Reza. You are a pale moon, stark and silver. There is a chance you will eclipse his shadow. There is a chance he will eclipse your light. We must see which one of you will rise.”



FIVE

JASS

NOT TODAY

I use the tether to draw myself to her, hand over hand, pulling myself closer and closer. I didn't think she'd beckon me to her anymore. Not now that she knows I'm coming to her. I thought fear alone would have her barricading herself inside her head, locking herself away tightly, even in her sleep, but as I was drifting into unconsciousness, I felt her tugging on our connection.

I go to her. Just as always, I construct a place for us in my mind. I want to see her properly. I want to see the sunlight on her skin. I want to see the way her hair catches the light and appears to burn, all coppers, bronze, and gold. Creating a bright, daylight place is risky; the sharp detail of it all could wake her up. It's a risk I'm willing to take, though. I cast the peripherals of my mind out,

forming a bright, clear, blue sky overhead. Below my feet, a sea of soft feathery grass that dances and bows as a gentle breeze tugs at it. In the distance, on the horizon, I create a city skyline. Rather, I should say I recreate it from memory—the tall glass structures, shining like spears of burning white light; the arching bow of the bridge stretching from one side of a river I also paint into the scene. The narrow, winding waterway looks like a piece of silver ribbon, glinting and shimmering as it catches the sunlight.

A beautiful day. A calm and peaceful day. I sit down in the grass, crossing my legs, and I focus on the tether. Reza is there, very close, waiting for me. I concentrate on drawing her to me, and she begins to materialize in the grass. She's still sleeping, curled into a ball, her knees tucked up high against her body. I can create landscapes, galaxies and entire worlds from memory inside my head, but I can't create her. I've tried countless times, and it never works. There are always too many flaws and inconsistencies. She's never her perfect self. I allow myself a long second to marvel at her as she sleeps, and I try not to feel. Being around her is so damned dangerous. She elicits the most unpredictable, erratic responses from me that I can't trust myself half the time.

Her eyelashes look like smudged charcoal, fanning out against her high, flushed cheekbones.

Her lips are slightly parted, her chest rising and falling evenly. Her fingers twitch, flexing and opening, as if she's reaching out for something in her dreams. I already know what she's reaching out for; she's reaching out for me. I wouldn't be here otherwise.

I place my hand on her shoulder, gently shaking her. It seems like a crime to disturb her, but our time here is limited; I want to make the most of it. Her eyes crack open, and she looks right at me. I could influence her thoughts and her emotions here. I could calm her. I could make her think and feel things she would never even consider normally, but I don't. I want the raw, unadulterated, pure version of Reza. I want her reactions to be real. I want all of her to be real. She inhales, stiffening a little when she realizes where she is. And who she's with, of course.

"Morning," I tell her.

She shakes her head, propping herself up on her elbow. She frowns, her face crumpling into a mask of confusion. "I shouldn't be here."

"Take a moment. Think it through," I say. I tired of arguing this out with her a long time ago. I usually allow her memories of our past meetings to trickle back to her for a few minutes before I even say anything. Saves on trying to reason her worry from her. Reza looks down into the grass, her fingers trailing through the long, supple strands,

and I know what she recalling: all of the times we've met like this and talked. All the times we've met like this and fucked. Her cheeks color bright crimson. She blinks a couple of times, then looks up at me accusingly.

"Why do you keep taking these memories from me?"

I pluck a stalk of the grass, twisting it absentmindedly around my finger. "I don't take them from you. I never have. You just never remember when you wake up."

"I don't believe you."

I knot the blade of grass. "I want you to remember this," I say. "Out there, in the waking world, you're terrified of me—"

"With damn good reason," she whispers.

I smile crookedly. "Depends who you are."

She pulls a face.

"Anyway, out there you're terrified of me. If you remembered what happened in here, you wouldn't run from me anymore. You'd move mountains to find to me."

Her eyes narrow. "You're so sure," she says softly. "You're so certain. Why would I use any of these meetings as an example of what you'll be like in the waking world? I'm in no danger. You can't hurt me in here."

Arching an eyebrow, I toss the stalk of grass to the ground. I'm smiling, which usually does

nothing to settle her nerves. "Can I make you come in here, Reza?"

She glances away, embarrassment obvious, all over her face. She doesn't need to say anything. We both know the truth.

"If I can cause you pleasure, why wouldn't I be able to cause you pain? If you think I can't hurt you in here, you're very much mistaken."

Her eyes grow wide. "I thought..." She trails off, this new revelation taking a while to sink in.

"What are you going to do when you're finally in front of me, Jass?" she asks. "We're not going to be friends. I'm going to do anything and everything I can to avoid you at all costs."

I shrug one shoulder. Lying back in the grass, I stare up at the clear sky, losing myself in the infinite expanse of blue. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But I'm not worried. This bond between us isn't something either of us can take or leave. It's indestructible, and it's not going anywhere. You won't be able to avoid me, Reza. You'll be drawn to me in person, just as you're drawn to me here."

She hisses under her breath. When I look over at her, her face is buried in her hands, and her shoulders are tensed. I sit up, wrapping my arm around her, and I pull her to me. She doesn't resist. She collapses into me, shuddering, as if she's relieved. I lie back down, and she rests her head on

my chest, nestled into the crook of my arm. I don't like how reassuring this position is. It's different being inside her. When I'm inside her and she's clinging to me, desperate for my touch, we're two opposing forces colliding, claiming one another. Right now, that isn't the case. She's seeking comfort from me, whether she likes it or not, and in return I'm offering her my protection.

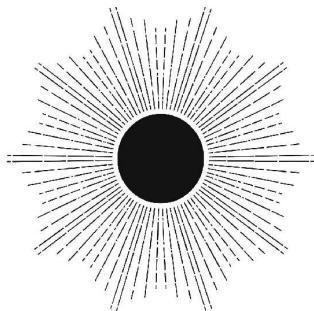
"You shouldn't have come here in your uniform," she says.

I hadn't even realized I'd clothed myself in the black and gold of the Construct. A moment's thought and the uniform is gone, replaced with a plain black shirt and pants. "I won't wear it here again," I tell her.

Silence prevails for a while. A single, lonely bird flits back and forth in the sky, and I watch it, admiring at its agility. When did I see a bird perform a show like that? I can't remember. It's fascinating to watch. Reza's hair tickles at my neck. I can smell her—floral and light, a pretty scent that haunts me day and night.

"Have you killed anyone today?" she whispers.

The bird disappears. I close my eyes. The breeze plays around us, blowing my hair across my face. "No. I haven't, Reza. Not today."



SIX

JASS

BARELY

Patience has never been a virtue I've possessed. I'm probably the most *impatient* person alive at this point in time, in fact, and that's saying something. There is a race of beings on a small, barren planet I encountered once, who have no concept of time whatsoever, and the idea of waiting for something causes them very real physical pain. They simply cannot even comprehend it. Right now, I feel like I am one and the same with that race. The flight time to Piriuss has been long and arduous already, made even less unpleasant by the incessant ramblings of my injured co-pilot.

"I could really use some medical assistance," he announces.

"I'm not a doctor. Now please. Suffer in

silence.”

“Not much of a humanitarian, are you?” Col says, laughing weakly. His dark hair is plastered to his head with sweat, and his lips have turned a ghastly shade of white. “You are human, aren’t you?”

I smirk. If only he knew. “Barely.”

“I’ve been told I’m descended from some of the first settlers who left Earth thousands of years ago. I was orphaned as a baby, though, so I can’t be sure. The Pirians—”

“I don’t care about your lineage, Col. I care about one thing, and one thing only. Landing on Pirius. Once we’re there, I’ll find the girl. I’ll kill whoever stands in my way.”

“And what then?” Col’s voice is weak. I don’t need to read his mind to know how much pain he’s in. His body is trembling with it, shouting his agony out loud for all to hear, so loud it penetrates my mind, filling it whole, making it annoyingly difficult to think straight. Must be hell for him. His babbling is an attempt on his part to distract himself, but I don’t think it’s working.

“What do you mean, and what then?” I demand.

“I mean, what are you going to do once you’re finally in a room with Reza? Are you planning on killing her? Kidnapping her? Taking her back to The Nexus? You’ll forgive me for saying so, but it

doesn't seem like your return would be all that welcome. So what are you going to do with her once you find her?"

"None of your business." The words come out hard and clipped. They sound self assured and confident, but the truth is he's posing a damn good question. I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do once I find her. The bond between us is strong. She has energy inside her identical to the energy I carry inside me. That's worth exploring and questioning her over. I keep trying to tell myself I want to find her because of that, but there are other reasons. At first, the meetings we shared in my dreamscapes were nothing more than a way to mess with her. It didn't take long for me to become enthralled with her, though. She couldn't remember much in her subconscious state. I asked her about her past endlessly, where she came from, who she knew there, but she couldn't access those memories. She could only be her, in that moment, and very quickly that became enough. She was beautiful. She was devastating. She captured my attention in the most fucked up way, and I haven't been able to shake her since.

Col laughs. It's the kind of teasing laugh that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "You're really bad at this," he says. "I can see it written all over your face. You're clueless."

He's so goddamn infuriating. I lean back into

my seat, and I close my eyes. I want to kill this man. I want to, but I can't. He is a means to an end, an entry ticket to a scenario I will have no access to otherwise. I felt the seers intent quite clearly when I ripped through Col's mind: the string of seers I will need to meet on my road to find the girl, each one only in possession of a snippet of the information I require to find her. A chain. And if one of them has their mind taken against their will, or finds that Col Pakka is dead, they kill themselves, severing the chain. So damn smart. Too smart for their own good. I'll make them pay for inconveniencing me. But...when the time is right, and not before.

"I'm not holding it against you," Col continues. "I don't blame you for being confused. I've been confused ever since I was told I had to hand myself over to the Construct. It took a lot of belief on my end when they told me what was going to happen."

Despite myself, I allow his words to intrigue me. "Why would you force yourself to believe what they were telling you, then? If you knew pain and suffering would land at your feet?"

Col merely shrugs. The movement causes him pain; he tries to hide it, but I can taste it on the tip of my tongue—coppery and bright, like the blood he's still shedding all over the rear bench that runs along the raptor's small cargo area. The craft is flying itself at this point. I'm not needed in the

pilot's chair, but I'm loath to go back there and sit with him. He might take it as a sign that I *want* to talk to him or something. I can't help but pivot in my seat when I ask him my question, though.

Col closes his eyes, stacking his hands on his ribs. He breathes out slowly, then smiles. "It's simple. I love my people, Beylar. I love them more than life itself. If a little pain and suffering might help them survive whatever's to come, then I'll willingly take it on."

Such a foolish sentiment. I know every type of life form in this galaxy. I've interrogated every single one of them on Archimedes, and they all crack. They all give up their friends and their loved ones when facing down the edge of a wickedly sharp blade. None of those Commonwealth fools would do the same for him, and yet he's here, bones broken, blood pouring freely, racked with pain, tormented on their behalf. So fucking blind.

I spin back around in my chair just in time for the proximity alarm to start going off. A planet is close by, and not just any planet. Col input Pirius' coordinates into the Raptor's nav center five hours ago. We've been breaking our necks to reach there ever since, and finally it appears that we've arrived.

"The descent through the atmosphere will be rough," Col warns. "You might want to take it slow. With that breach in the hull—"

"I know what I'm doing, fighter." I'm already

assessing the planet, hunting for the best approach trajectory. I haven't said anything to Col, but the hull breach is actually much worse than I first thought. A clear foot long rent along the underside of the craft if the exterior scanners are to be believed, and they're state of the art, so I have no reason to doubt them. A planet with barely an atmosphere at all would give us a bumpy ride at this stage. A planet with an atmosphere as thick and turbulent as Pirius'? Well, let's just say we'll be lucky if we make it down without the raptor tearing itself in two.

I angle the craft's nose so it's online for a shallow approach, and I cut the engines to a third power. Once we hit the outer atmosphere, I'll cut the engines altogether and coast my way down if at all possible. That kind of landing will require extreme concentration and a high level of skill. Luckily I possess both.

"Not that I care particularly about your wellbeing," I announce over my shoulder, "but you might want to strap in for this." It'd be very unfortunate if I managed to stay my hand and keep the man alive, only to have him die during landing. Col grumbles as he clambers back into the passenger seat beside me, his face a rictus of discomfort as he fastens the safety harness around his body.

"Aren't you going to strap in, too?" he asks.

My answer is simple. “No.”

As expected, the raptor shakes as it hits the outer atmosphere of the planet. I allow the craft to dip down a little further, waiting to see how badly the heat shields warm up before I cut the engines. A mere ten seconds, and the raptor’s sensors are all screaming, alarms sounding from every on-board system. Life Support: 54 %. Heat Deflectors: 33 %. Power Relay: 16%. Communications: Down. Coolant Cells: 12% and falling rapidly.

“Shit,” Col hisses, taking in the readouts. “We’re fucked. Why the hell are you even attempting to land this thing? It’s going to explode before we even break through the cloud layer.”

It’s true that the planet’s cloud layer is lower than most. Thicker than most. The entire planet looks like a swirling mass of white from our vantage point at the edge of its gravitational pull. I’ve had to do this before, though. Col hasn’t taken in consideration the fact that I, myself, can add a little protection to the raptor’s shields when the time comes. I grunt as I place both hands on the craft’s controls, wrestling to keep us on our flight path. Pirius’ gravitational pull is lighter than I’m used to. Regis makes his men train at twice standard gravity in order to make them stronger and more resilient, but even with that added advantage it’s proving difficult to keep the craft under control. I check the hull’s scanners, and the cause for the

insane amount of drag we're experiencing is immediately obvious: the foot long rent in the hull is now three feet long and growing by the second. Damn.

"Take the controls," I command, hitting the release button so that a secondary panel pops up in front of Col. "This is going to take both of us."

Col looks strangely relieved. He doesn't complain about his broken body as he goes about aligning his panel to match mine. He moves with the authority and command of someone who's flown before, and flown well. The two of us work furiously to control the raptor's erratic approach toward Piriuss' surface.

The noise level inside the craft is deafening. So many alarms and klaxons all wailing at once. I hold my hand over the control board, and I imagine the flow of power running to all the alarms. I picture it, until the flow is a vivid, living thing inside my mind. I cut it off. The alarms stop wailing, every last one, and Col shoots me a nervous sidelong glance out of the corner of his eye.

No words, though. No time. The planet is growing larger and larger out of the view port ahead, and we don't seem to be slowing down. A small tongue of flame licks over the nose of the raptor, and I realize we're fighting a losing battle.

"Thirty thousand feet to impact," the cool, calm voice of the ship's nav system informs us.

“Twenty-five thousand feet.”

We hit the cloud layer, and Col curses loudly. “If we don’t scrub our speed, we’re going to crash into the dunes and bury ourselves down a couple of hundred feet. No one will ever find us. Won’t matter, because we’ll be dead, but still...”

“Twenty thousand feet to impact.”

I cut off the nav system with a sweep of my hand. Okay, now is the time to act. Sooner than I’d hoped, but Col is right. If I don’t do something now, it will be too late. I enclose my mind around the entire perimeter of the raptor, allowing it to feel out the damage, to investigate and test out the tear. It’s bad. Really fucking bad. I can’t press the jagged edges of metal back together, because a solid chunk of it is missing. I sit back in my chair, releasing the controls.

“What the hell are you doing? Jass! I can’t hold this thing on my own!”

Col’s panic fills my head, but I push that out. I have no room for that right now. I need to focus. I need to concentrate...

I picture my mind as a fist, closing around the raptor. Tightening its hold, capturing the craft inside its grasp. Then I picture pulling the ship back, tugging on it, pulling with all my might. The raptor shudders but continues on its path, tearing through thick layers of cloud. I clench my mental fist even tighter, pulling even harder. This is more difficult

that I'd anticipated. Instead of slowing, the ship's speed increases, straining at my grasp.

"Beylar! We're breaking through the cloud. We're breaking though!"

I shut Col out. Inhaling one last deep breath, I picture both of my hands closing around the raptor, grappling hold of it, dragging it back, forcing it to obey. I envision it bending to my will with every scrap of power I possess. We clear the cloud layer, and a mere three or four thousand feet below, the ground rises up to meet us. Sand. So much sand.

"BEYLAR!"

I jerk the craft back with all my might, and the raptor finally obeys, pulling up a little. We're still hurtling toward the planet, but our speed is cut in half by my efforts.

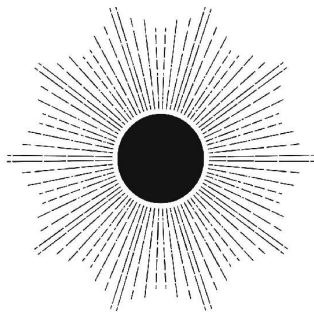
Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

I have no idea if it will be enough.

I have no ide—



SEVEN

REZA

SUB CITY

I feel the impact the moment it happens.

The ground doesn't shake. No alarms go off. I'm lying on my cot inside my room when a jolt of fear slams into me, knocking the air clean out of my lungs.

Jass Beylar is here.

Not close. But somewhere on the planet. I have to fight the extraordinary need inside me to bolt out of my window, as I promised only hours ago that I would not. Instead I lean over the side of my cot and I throw up. I've never known such a feeling of dread and apprehension before. Not like the one that coils itself into knots inside me like a pit of snakes right now. There's a polite knock at my door, and then a slightly more urgent, harried knock

when I don't respond.

“Yes. Enter,” I wheeze, spitting onto the floor.

A young seer enters, maybe no more than fourteen cycles old, his shaved head and the missing sleeves of his robe marking him out as an apprentice, not quite yet in possession of his sight. He bows his head in deference. “You have been summoned,” he says softly, avoiding making eye contact with me. “The council wishes to speak with you about a matter of great importance.”

“Yes, I know. He's here, isn't he? Jass?” If the squalls on Pirius weren't so harsh, the sub city would be alive with technology. As it stands, few electronics function properly under the ground due to interference from the persistent, choking squalls of sand. Pirius has advanced radar systems that can cut through that interference, though. They must have watched Jass' ship enter the planet's atmosphere. They know he's arrived just as well as I do.

The young apprentice blinks at the floor, shaking his head. “That was the only message I was told to give to you,” he says. “I'm sorry, I can't—” He winces as he tries to look up at me. Fails. Looks back down at his feet. “Your presence here is very strange,” he tells me, almost as if he's imparting a secret against his will. “I can't...I can't seem to look at you straight on.”

“It's okay. I'm sorry.” Seems like a worthless

offering, but it's all I have to say. Other, more practiced seers always have that tightness around their mouths whenever they're in my presence. For a long while I thought it was simple displeasure; I didn't consider there was a chance that I made them physically uncomfortable until Darius explained it to me.

I get up, already fully dressed, sliding my feet in my boots, and I follow behind the young apprentice, whose shoulders twitch imperceptibly with every few steps he takes. There are ancient chisel marks in the walls here, millennia old, made by seers of the past who carved out this particular tunnel way by hand. Most of the tunnels are natural formations in the rock, volcanic lava tubes from when Pirius was young and still forming. Darius told me once that this people used to live in cities and towns on the planet's surface, but many generations ago the seers had visions of a terrible catastrophe that would lead their world into darkness and destruction. They prepared by relocating underground, and managed to complete construction of their subterranean home a mere four months before a massive asteroid hit the planet and caused a seventy eight year sandstorm that blotted out the suns and made it impossible for flight or space travel altogether.

The apprentice walks ahead of me, taking only left hand turns for a long time. At last, he finally

turns right, leading me into a large, cavernous space with what looks like a glass domed ceiling. The glass is clear when we enter, but then a cloak of darkness spreads across it, sparks of white light punching through the black—countless star systems, and galaxies beyond ours, some flashing red, while others glimmer a pale, ethereal blue. This must be the only place in the entire sub city that houses any form of real technology. On the cavern floor, a number of tables and chairs have been arranged around a central observation deck, where three seers stand together, faces lifted to the ceiling, staring up at the grand star map overhead.

Darius is nowhere to be seen. A woman steps out of the shadows on the other side of the room: Chancellor Pakka. Her white hair is heavily braided, and her nose is high and unusually narrow for a seer. She gestures, and the apprentice heads right for her. A cool breeze whistles down the tunnel behind me, buffeting my back. On the surface of Pirius, the binary suns will be baking the desert sand dunes, cooking the sand to glass in some regions. Down here, miles below ground, the temperatures are quite opposite. I shiver as I cross the cavern floor, winding my way through unoccupied chairs toward Erika. She inclines her head as I arrive, dismissing the apprentice boy, who bolts and vanishes, running back the way we came, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. “Please

accept my apologies, Reza,” Erika says, in her raspy, rich voice. “Van To’s considered an adult now, but he’s still very inexperienced. He’s yet to build up his mental shields or learn how to protect himself from harmful outside influences. To some of us, you burn our minds. Others have reported that your presence causes considerable nerve pain. Then, others...” She cocks her head to one side, smiling ever so slightly. “In rare cases, others have reported an uncontrollable sensation of pleasure that travels over their skin. Much like a lover’s caress. They’re intoxicated by you, only to find themselves instantly sober the moment they move away from you. Poor Van To’s blinded by you in more ways than one. He says you shine brightly to him. Too bright to look at. You bring about a deep and distressing loss of control in him. He finds it difficult to focus on his tasks. I should have sent someone else to bring you here, but I thought it might do him good. Desensitize him to you. Over time, he’ll grow stronger. You just take a little getting used to.”

Strange. Troubling. I fold my arms around my body, holding onto myself, not quite sure what to do. Erika just smiles a formal smile, holding out her hand. “It’s good to see you again, Reza. The other Chancellor’s will be here shortly for our meeting. I trust you know why you were summoned?”

The shockwave of fear that hit me only twenty

minutes ago resonates inside me all over again. “Yes. I know. He...*Jass Beylar* has arrived on the planet. You sent your own son to bring him back here? I didn’t know Col was completing solo missions for the Commonwealth.” As long as I’ve known Col, he’s only ever wanted to be a pilot. A solo mission for him would have been a giant undertaking.

Erika nods slowly, tucking her hands into the vast pockets of her robe. “I know. I wasn’t sure it was the best move, but...I saw many things that are yet to come to pass, and that was one of them. I acted as a demonstration of faith to other Pirians. I believe the visions I received seven cycles ago will all come to pass. And how better to show that than to offer up the safety of the one most dear to me as proof? It will take them some time to reach us, however preparations must be made. We need to make sure we’re ready when Col and Beylar arrive.”

“And what can *I* do to help?” I’ve already told them everything I remember about my encounters with Jass. Everything I experienced of him in person, and everything I know of him through others. I’ve recounted every tale and rumor I’m privy to.

Erika’s eyes are slightly cloudy. A faint, milky white hue rests over her irises—a sign that she has spent very little, if any, time outside on the surface

of the planet. Only the richest, most highly esteemed seers are honored enough to remain underground their entire lives. The burning suns affect—or *used* to affect—their visions. The more time spent on the surface of the planet, the less frequent and intense the visions. Erika’s eyes skate over me and everything surrounding me as if they barely perceive what stands before her, and instead she is in a constant state of trance, seeing an entirely different plane of reality.

“It’s not often we’re shown conflicting visions of the future, Reza. Before my sight vanished I saw the people of Pirian being attacked. I saw great ships falling from the sky. Construct ships. I saw a black moon, floating out in space. I saw fire, and pain, and death. So much death. But then, I also saw you here, Reza. And...I saw Jass Beylar, too. He was helping us. I saw him help us defeat the Construct.” She trails off, her eyes growing even cloudier. Her thin, barely there brows pinch together, a tiny line forming between them. “I was shown two potential futures. One where we all suffer and die. And one where the unlikeliest person in the galaxy comes to our aid and protects us. Some visions come about without any assistance,” she says. “In circumstances such as these, a little interference is required, though. A helping hand, if you will. We’re aware of Jass’ interest in you, Reza. If he comes here, there’s a

chance, a very *slim* chance you might be able to convince him to work with us.”

Oh gods. There’s no way Erika understands what she’s asking of me. She can’t understand Jass at all. He’s never going to leave his position of power with the Construct to fight for the Pirians. She might as well ask me to stop the planet from turning. She might as well have just asked me to stop the suns from rising. It won’t matter who pleads this case to Jass. He won’t listen.

I’m saved from having to crush Erika’s dreams when Darius and another seer I haven’t met before arrives in the cavern, talking hurriedly between themselves. Erika’s eyes are suddenly sharp. Focused. Her head whips around, her gaze locking onto the two men. “Darius. Chancellor Gain. Thank you for agreeing to meet here in my sector instead of the council chambers. I’m afraid my condition appears to be worsening rapidly. The walk would have caused me considerable trouble.”

I scan the woman standing next to me from head to toe. There doesn’t appear to be anything wrong with her from my assessment, but both Darius and Gain bow their heads, very real concern all over their faces. “Of course,” Gain says, his voice grave. “Whatever you need, Erika. Let us know if you require any assistance in the coming days.”

Darius even goes so far as to place his hand on

the tall woman's shoulder. An out-of-place gesture for this very reserved, stoic race. "I've already sent out word to the second sector. People will begin to make their way here shortly."

Erika smiles, nodding slowly. "I'm sure the gathering will be splendid. I'm only sad I won't be able to attend myself." She turns to me, holding a hand out, gesturing for me to follow her. "Now that these pleasantries are over, we must hurry. Reports from the outer deserts state that a Construct craft crash-landed there less than an hour ago. Men on the ground have requested permission to approach the craft—"

"That mustn't be allowed to happen," Gain interjects. "They need to know we have a plan in place. It's critical that Col and Jass Beylar must make their own way here, through the channels that were arranged. It has been seen."

Erika holds up a hand as she leads us over to a display screen. Tapping the screen to activate it, she gives Gain a reassuring sideways glance. "Don't worry, friend. The timeline is set. Everything will occur as it's supposed to. In *that* instance at least, there is nothing to fear."

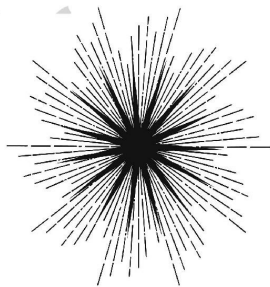
"And once you have him?" I hesitate. "Once Jass Beylar arrives here at the sub city, what happens then?"

All three of the seers turn to me. They remain silent for far too long. Eventually Darius speaks,

and his words do nothing to comfort me. “*You* will have to be ready to face him, then, Reza. You will have to be the one to confront him, and for that... there are things you must learn.”

My veins are suddenly filled with ice. “Learn? And what do you mean, *confront him*?”

Darius’ strange eyes do not blink. They are dark voids that whisper of eternity. “There are training exercises we can show you to help strengthen your mind and your body, Reza. Certain techniques we do not usually share with outsiders. The boy can control others with *his* mind. He can delve deep inside a man and pluck out his most terrible secrets. We seers were once strong, but he is beyond us now. We will not be able to restrain or resist him. You, on the other hand...you’ve recounted to us on many occasions that the boy could not affect you. He couldn’t read your mind, and he couldn’t force you to bend to his will. That makes you unique in all the universe. That makes you our only hope.”



EIGHT

JASS

SAND

Pain.

Pain, everywhere.

A buzzing, high pitched and irritating.

A loud drum, pounding inside my head.

Hands on my body.

Hands, turning me over. Shaking me roughly at the shoulders.

“Jass!”

When was the last time someone called me by that name? When was the last time I heard it on someone’s lips? For a second, I’m stunned, struggling to remember. I open my eyes, squinting at the knife of pain that slices through my head, causing me to shield my face with my hand. So damn bright. *Too* bright. I try to suck in a breath and suddenly I’m writhing in agony, an impossibly

strong vice tightening around my ribcage.

“Huh. Looks like you’ve earned yourself some bruised ribs, too. How ironic. Can you get up?” It takes me a long moment to recall who’s talking to me. The voice is vaguely familiar. And then I remember: the Commonwealth fighter. Leaving The Nexus. The asteroid field. Crashing on Pirius. *The girl*.

My eyes adjust slowly to the burning suns overhead. Two of them. I hadn’t noticed this was a binary system on approach to the planet. I wasn’t paying attention. I was too busy thinking about *her*. What I’m going to do with her when I get my hands on her. Where I will take her. What I actually want from her. All I know is that an undeniable force draws me to her. Trying to ignore the pull would be as impossible as trying to deny my lungs oxygen.

Ankle deep in sand, the fine white powder spilling over the tops and filling his boots, Col Pakka stands over me, face splattered with blood, a shit-eating grin spreading across his face. “Y’know, you could use a hair cut,” he remarks, clearing his throat. “Honestly, I didn’t think you’d have hair at all. I expected you to look like an albino rostick.”

There were no rosticks on The Nexus. I know what they are though—pink, wrinkled rodent type creatures with small yellow nubs for teeth. On other ships and outposts with less diligent cleaning crews, the creatures chew through thousands of meters of

wiring every year, causing pandemonium wherever they can, demolishing ration stores and breeding like...well, rosticks. I scowl at Col, easing myself to my feet. Now that I'm fully conscious and my faculties have returned to me, I make sure I don't display my pain as I stand. It's a show of weakness. A sign of vulnerability. I don't want to advertise the fact that I'm hurt to a man I consider my enemy.

“Why didn't you kill me? Why didn't you end this when you had the chance? You were just...*standing there.*”

Col laughs, slowly bending to collect the jump bag that's sitting at his feet. “I could have,” he muses. “I could have easily buried your head in the sand and let you suffocate. The seers told me specifically to keep you alive, though. They'd be pretty pissed if I came back without you, and it's no good trying to lie to those guys. They're very talented at spotting a lie.”

I growl under my breath, spinning around, searching for my own bag. Frustration hits me like a wave when I notice how badly damaged the raptor is. It's in pieces. Literal pieces, scattered through the desert, twisted metal impaled into the sand. The shards jut out of the ground at odd angles, littering a deep impact scar that runs a mile due north from here right to the very dune I'm standing on. A thick plume of black, acrid smoke rises from the furthest, largest piece of debris—obviously the engine blew

as soon the craft hit land. If it weren't for the cockpit's emergency collision shields, both Col and I would most certainly be dead. My stomach lurches even further when I look up and see beyond the mess that was once my ship. A wall of orange, brown, yellow, black seethes on the horizon. So much sand, swirling up and crashing in on itself like a breaking wave atop a wall of even more sand and dirt so high it almost blocks out one of the suns. And it's headed directly for us at an astonishing rate.

"*Yeah*," Col says. "I let you sleep a while, but when that thing started to get a little too close for comfort, I figured it'd be better to wake you up and get the hell out of here."

"I need to find my bag." I scan the debris field, looking for anything that vaguely resembles the aft section of the Raptor, where I stowed my military bag. It's impossible to discern one part from another, though. Absolutely impossible.

"No time for that, boss." Col spits into the sand, tilting his body weight with the look of someone very used to standing on unstable ground. He points at the huge, swirling mass that's heading toward us, shaking his head. "I've seen some storms in my time, but that big bastard's a deal breaker. We need to find somewhere to wait it out. Underground. And right now. It might look like it's moving slow, but it's not. We have thirty minutes to

find shelter and that's pushing it."

"I don't give a shit if the storm swallows you up and eats you alive. I won't go anywhere without that bag, Col Pakka." I step off, down the other side of the dune, heading in the direction of the storm. I can feel the sand trying to claim me already, in my hair, scratching at my skin, crunching between my teeth like grit. Col grabs me by the arm, snarling under his breath.

"You think a couple of changes of clothes are going to be of use to you here? Come on, Jass. We'll find you something new to wear once we're safely inside the sub city. Until then, I'm sure you'll manage."

I wrench my arm free, pinning him under an openly hostile glare. Like I give a damn about the clean clothes I packed for myself. Like I care about the rations, or the water. There is only one thing in that bag that I care about, and it's not something I'll be able to come by here on this godforsaken planet. The vials of Light I stowed at the bottom of the bag may not have even survived the crash, but I have to look for them. I have to make sure. I've been weaning myself off the dose, cycle after cycle, trying to control it, and for the most part I have been successful. Despite my efforts, though, I'm still an addict. I still can't survive forever without the stuff. If I'm being honest with myself, I know in three days I'll be trying to claw the skin from my

own body and sweating like I'm being roasted in a furnace. It will *not* be pretty.

I keep walking down the sand dune.

“Jass! You’re fucking crazy!” Col hollers after me.

Maybe I am. But this fighter, with his horribly inappropriate sense of humor and apparent lack of fear or common sense, will not like the man I become without my dose of Light. I’ll seem like a picnic right now by comparison. I can’t explain this to him. If I tell him I need the bag because of the Light that’s stowed inside it, I’ll be admitting another weakness. I can’t appear to have any chinks in my armor. He’ll take the information and use it against me. He’ll tell these seers he keeps speaking of. He’ll tell *her*.

The sand shifts and slides under my boots as I scramble up the side of another dune. I use my hands to climb, but it doesn’t seem to help. I make very slow, grueling progress, and the pain in my ribcage grows worse by the second. I’ve nearly reached the top of the dune when my heel snags on something and I’m falling back down again, scrambling, wrestling to try and stop myself from slipping down to the very bottom of the dune. No good, though. I end up rolling, tumbling, the black Construct cape that’s been a part of my uniform for so many cycles wrapping tightly around my body, blotting out the light. At the foot of the dune, I fight

my way out of the cape, only to find Col Pakka attached to the end of my foot, his hand wrapped around my ankle. So I didn't trip, then. I was *pulled* back down. My temper flares. It's a wonder I've been able to keep it in check thus far, but now my fury sears my vision, turning everything red, distorting the suns and the dunes surrounding us.

"You're touching me," I hiss. "You clearly don't value your life."

Col rolls onto his back, panting, staring straight up at the sky overhead. "I know. Crazy, right? I'm not usually one for confrontation. I'm as surprised as you are. I'm a pilot, y'know? I'm not typically assigned roles like this. And I sure as hell haven't ever been sent somewhere on my own. I get that this may—"

I clench my fist, curling my fingers into my palm one at a time, concentrating my attention on Col's chest. I flex my mind, imagining the breaks in his ribs. Three of them. I can sense each one clearly. I flex a little further, and then there are *four* breaks. Col lets out an agonized yell, doubling over, clutching at his side, his rambling statement cutting off as he wheezes, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Don't touch me. Do *not* try and stop me." I get up, and I start to climb again. I make it over the first dune, and then a second. The third is high and steep, and takes me a full ten minutes to labor up, by which time the wall of the storm is only a few

minutes away. I stand at the top of the dune, my cape flapping crazily behind me in the rising winds, my hair blowing around my face. I twist around to look behind me: Col is right where I left him, lying in the sand. My vision is excellent, but I can't tell if his eyes are open or not. He may have passed out from the fresh onslaught of pain I visited on him, or he might still be awake, merely catching his breath. Either way, it serves him right for interfering.

I turn back to face the storm and I calculate how long it will take me to search each broken piece of the raptor. Longer than I have before the storm hits, that's for sure. Col was right about that. Still. It'll be fine. I push forward, breathing hard as I tackle another dune, and then another. The first sections of the raptor I pick through are nothing more than bent, misshapen hunks of metal. I reach the Raptor's main hull just as the wall of the storm hits, enveloping the world in sudden darkness. Acting quickly, I create a field around myself, pushing back the sand particles, so that they hit an invisible wall a few inches from my body. Occasionally one of two particles break through the shield, striking my skin, burning, but for the most part I am safe. I hunt and kick through the remains of the raptor, blindly overturning torn seats and safety harnesses, storage bins, and chunks of electronic panels, before something forces me to stop in my tracks. How deep is this storm? How

long will it rage? Col seemed to think we'd need to hunker down and wait a long time for it to pass. And he's lying there, on his back, consumed by the storm and the sand right now, unable to move, unable to breathe...

I should damn well leave him there. I should just be rid of him once and for all. But if I do nothing and the man dies...

Scowling, I cast out a mental probe, searching for Col. The dunes were annoying and difficult to climb, but the distance I actually travelled was minimal. He shouldn't be too far away. I should easily be able to locate him and place the same kind of shield around his body that I've placed around mine while I continue looking for the bag. It'll cost me nothing energy-wise. He should be—

I stop marching forward through the storm. I angle my shoulders, tilting my head to one side, analyzing my senses. I've found Col, but he's not where I left him any longer. And there's someone else with him. Someone...*strange*. An unknown to me—a kind of creature I've never experienced before, which is odd, considering the Construct have made it their business to root out, assess, (and enslave) all life forms within their grasp. This entity, whatever it is, is intelligent. I can feel the sharp edge of its mind, reaching out, scanning and searching in the same way I am. I sense its consciousness comb over me, almost as tangible as

a physical touch. I shy away, stepping backward, as if I can remove myself from its reach. How the hell is it doing that? How the hell *can* it do that? No species is capable of utilizing its mind as a tool in the same way I can. None of them can, plain and simple. I would have known. I would have found them...

I turn and press forward toward the crash site, more focused than ever on finding the Light. I'm stronger than usual when I dose. My reactions are through the roof. I can cordon off my mind, more importantly, shutting my consciousness away in a tightly locked rook inside my head without even trying, preventing anyone or anything from breaking through. It was paranoia that drove me to learn how to protect myself in that way, rather than experience, but right now I'm glad to know I can shut this intruder out. I need to find that Light. I need to find it *right now*. I push forward, hoping to find the rest of the raptor, but the storm is raging so fiercely now that it's almost impossible to tell up from down, let alone north from south. The wind howls, and along with it comes the lonely sound of some kind of creature, keening at the storm. My ears rush. My eyes sting beyond comprehension.

I can't find the rest of the raptor. I should be able to reach out with my mind and locate it, but even my powers are limited. I'm concentrating so hard on Col and his mystery friend that I can't

spare any energy to track down the crash site. Prioritizing and categorizing danger is the only way to stay alive, and I've gotten good at it. I reel through the storm, staggering from left to right, waiting to get lucky, only it doesn't happen. I sense Col and his friend moving. Moving *away* from my location. They must have assumed I'm dead. A reasonable assumption. No normal person could stay alive in a brutal storm like this. I smirk to myself as I continue forward, and for a moment I see everything working out perfectly. Col and his friends will think I'm gone. They'll let their guard down. They won't be looking for me. I'll be free to go wherever I please. I will track down the girl using my senses alone. I can feel her here so clearly, so perfectly. I can sense her fear even as I press onward through the storm. She's anxious. She...she *knows*. She feels me here, as I feel her. This revelation has me worried. If she's working with these seers, then she'll be able to confirm that I'm not dead. If her skills are as sharp as mine, she'll be able to lead them right to me. That won't do. That won't—

A vicious, bright pain burns suddenly in the back of my neck. Out of nowhere, my shield comes crashing down as I struggle to suck in a breath of air. What the...? What the *fuck*? I press my hand to the back of my neck, and my fingers make contact with something cool. Something hard. Something

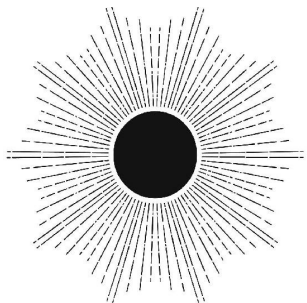
metal. A needle. Some...some kind of *dart*? The anger I felt at Col for trying to stop me from finding my bag is nothing compared to the rage that fills me now. Someone *shot* me with a dart gun?

My thoughts slow. This...this *cannot* be happening. This is *not* good.

Confusion swamps me. I just...don't...I just don't understand. How did they get close enough to attack? I'm still monitoring Col and the other being as they move further and further away from me, way beyond the range of even the most high tech dart gun. I release them from my mental focus and I throw my consciousness out wide, casting a net over the desert. There has to be an explanation for this. There just has to be.

And then, there, on the edge of the storm, I feel him. A lone soldier. Another unknown creature. Such an unrecognizable life sign, just as unique as the other. I've been foolish. I should never have shut off the realms of my mind. I should have remained vigilant. I should have made sure my senses were still on high alert, because there weren't two of them out there in the devastating, swirling sand.

There were *three*.



NINE

REZA

SLOW BURN

4 Cycles Ago

The Invictus is burning. I know it's the Invictus, because the ship's name is emblazoned in yellow paint across the steel inner hull right in front of me. Aside from that, I remember the scene unfolding out of the view port of the escape pod I'm sitting in. General Stryker, face covered in blood, stalking from one end of the launch bay to the other, shooting any soldier who got in his way. The throb, whine and the pop of phase rifles, going off everywhere. The smell of burning hair and metal, contaminating the air. The taste of my own

blood on my tongue. And Jass Beylar, standing on the deck outside my escape pod, hand stretched out, preventing me from leaving the doomed vessel.

My heart rate spikes. I know this is a dream. I know I've been living on Piriuss for the past three cycles, and that I'm going to be safe when I open my eyes. I can't make that knowledge stick, though. It all feels so real. It all feels like it's happening right now. Gods, I have to get out of here. I have to leave. The whole ship's unstable; it's likely to blow any second. This will be my last chance to flee this place. I won't get another opportunity like it. If I don't free myself from this prison now, I'll never be free.

A needling sensation pushes at the boundaries of my mind, and I raise up my mental shields, easy as flicking a switch. Jass is trying to get inside my head. He wants to control me. To make me submit to him. I won't do it, though. I'll never submit to him.

"What do you think would've happened if I'd managed to hold you back that day?" Jass' voice startles me. I nearly leap out of the pod's command chair, a loud cry of alarm ripping from my throat. I spin around, and there he is behind me, a thin line of blood streaking down his cheek. His Construct uniform is burned on his left arm and torn at the collar. A black smudge runs down his

temple, staining his cheekbone. Leaning forward, he hits a number of buttons on the control panel and the escape pod lurches forward, hurtling toward the open launch bay doors.

“What are you doing?” I hiss. “You weren’t in here that day.”

Jass adjusts the pod’s nav systems again, still hovering over me, and then he leans back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. Fire blooms like angry red and orange flowers around us as the pod flies out of the Invictus at top speed. “I can afford a little artistic license, I think. I’ve had a shitty day.”

“Ahh, poor Jass. Didn’t meet your kill quota for the quarter? Has Governor Regis removed your privileges?”

He pouts, running a gloved hand down the support strut next to him, apparently studying it. “I couldn’t sense you today. I thought...I thought maybe something had happened.”

He doesn’t sound like he’s lying. He sounds like he’s actually, genuinely concerned. I sit back into the control chair, and I allow my eyes to travel over him from head to foot. There’s a pensive, restless air to him tonight. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright and alert, roving over me with an intensity he normally tries to conceal. I don’t know what to say to him. I don’t know how to make him feel better, or why I should even want to make him

feel better.

“I was underground,” I tell him, frowning. “Maybe my distance below the surface dimmed our connection. Made it hard for you to detect me.”

Jass taps a fingernail against the support strut, his lips parting ever so slightly. “Maybe.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll be sure to spend more time underground from now on,” I say sharply. The escape pod’s a thousand feet from the ship now. It stops of its own accord, listing for a second before Jass jerks his head and the entire pod spins around on an invisible axis, until the view port is facing back toward the burning craft. The Invictus, the ship on which I spent eight long years learning how to survive, looks like it’s finally spent. The entire starboard section that used to house the personnel quarters is now missing. Nothing remains but a jagged tear in the ship’s metal work; it looks like some huge creature came along and tore the sector away with its bare teeth. Beyond the ship, the planet Darax is still sending volley after volley of phase missiles up to destroy the vessel locked in its orbit. Huge swathes of blue and green and yellow mark out the landmasses, the oceans, and the deserts on the surface. It’s beautiful. The whole scene of destruction and carnage is kind of beautiful in its own way.

“You need to be able to see the stars overhead

at night,” Jass says quietly. “You’d never be able to live underground. Not permanently, anyway.”

Have I told him how often I sit outside my shack at night, whenever the skies on Pirius are clear, and I stare up at the stars? Have I told him how they comfort me? Did I confess this to him during one of our other meetings like this? I can’t remember. He could have raided my memories or my emotions at some point. He could have taken that information against my will, or he could have just guessed. How he discovered this about me doesn’t really matter. It makes me feel distorted and twisted inside to think that he knows me so well.

Slowly, The Invictus begins to roll, spinning inward toward the planet. Jass hisses through his teeth; I don’t think I’m supposed to hear his reaction to what’s happening in front of us, but I do. “I thought the ship exploded,” I say. “It impacted with Darax’s atmosphere?”

“It did more than that. It crashed down to the planet’s surface.”

I whip my head around, looking for the deception on Jass’ face. There isn’t any, though. “You should be dead, then. You didn’t leave the ship. You stayed behind. I saw you standing there on the deck as the pod left.”

Jass’ eyes are rimmed with bright, blazing gold. Somehow, there’s more blood on his face. His

cheeks and forehead are flecked with it. And his shirt...I didn't notice before, but it's soaked through and sticky with blood, too. He winces as he slides down the wall, landing on his ass. "I should have died a thousand times by now, Reza. I keep managing to dust myself off, though."

My hands won't work as I fumble with the safety harness strapping me into the control chair. It takes me far too long to get the damn thing open. Once I'm free, I drop down to the floor beside Jass, holding my hand to his forehead. He's cold. So, so cold. "What happened? What happened to you that day? And why in seven hells are you choosing to relive it right now?"

He flashes me a brief, broken smile as he clutches at his chest. "I went down with the ship. If I'd gone after you...they would have followed me. They would have stopped you. They'd have taken you back."

Something unpleasant and sharp feels like it's stabbing into my head. I can't think for a minute. Can barely breathe. "So...you chose to let me go?" I whisper. "Why? Why would you do that, when you were so hell bent on trying to stop me at first?"

Another broken smile. "I didn't care if you stayed with on the ship, Reza. I just wanted you to stay with me. When that wasn't going to be possible..." His voice cracks a little, and more blood flecks from his lips. He's dying. I can feel it

in the very root of my soul. It feels crushing and terrible, and I can't allow it to happen. Pressing both my hands against his chest, I apply pressure to his wounds.

"End this, Jass. For all the gods' sakes end it. Take us somewhere else."

His eyes are sad and filled with pain. He reaches up and strokes his fingers against my cheek, his eyes studying my features in the most fascinated way. "Where would you like to go?" he rasps.

"Anywhere but here. Please. I can't...I can't bear it."

I'd be this distraught over any injured person. I'd be this torn apart by anyone suffering this badly. That's what I tell myself. Jass closes his eyes, and there's a flicker in my vision. A sensation of falling. The walls of the escape pod fall away, and in their place a brightly lit Construct med center materializes.

Whoa...

The place is empty. Jass sits on the edge of a bed, still dressed in his Construct uniform, but he's no longer in pain. His eyes aren't clouded by death anymore. He seems, as far as I can tell by looking at him, perfectly normal. His face is clean, and his clothing looks brand new. He grips hold of the edge of the bed, giving me a tight smile.

"Parts of the ship survived," he says. "The

med bays were packed for weeks. It took them a long time to fix me, but in the end..." He holds out his hands, palms up, showing me that he's unharmed. "I felt you arrive on Piriuss," he continues. "I didn't know exactly where you were in the galaxy, but I knew you were safe. I felt it through the bond. I was relieved."

I pace slowly around the bed, fixing him under my gaze. "Why are you telling me this? Why would you tell me any of it?"

The muscles in his jaw jump and flex. His expression turns blank. "I don't know. It serves no purpose. I just..." He shrugs, apparently lost for words. "That day, when I found you in division eight. When you'd tried to kill yourself," he says slowly. "After the doctors saw you and patched you up, they put you out. While you were unconscious, you tugged on the tether, and I came to you again. You talked. You spoke to me for hours, and I listened. I got to know so much about you. I'm...I'm not capable of talking like that, Reza. But I can show you things..."

He gets to his feet and paces toward me, as if he has all the time in the world. "I envy you sometimes, you know."

"Envy me? Why?"

"Because you don't remember the first time we kissed. Every time it happens here, it's the first time for you. Every time I touch you, or you touch

me, it's the very first time, and I can see it in your eyes. The fear, the wonder, the hope, and the despair, all bleeding into one another." His voice is low, deep and fierce. "It makes me wish I could go back and relive it all in the same way."

*What? What the hell is he talking about?
"We've never kissed. I would never do that. I would never kiss a..."*

"A monster like me?" He angles his head to the side, narrowing his eyes. "I promise you it's true. Sometimes you remember what's happened in other dreams when you come here. Sometimes you don't. You never remember any of it when you're out there, awake. I can show you, though. I can show you all of it. You want to see our real first kiss?"

A handheld med scanner sits on the bench beside the bed. I consider using it to scan my own head, to see if I'm sick. There's no other reason why I would ever step forward and say yes to him. Because that's precisely what I do. "Show me, then. Prove it to me. At least then I'll know if you're telling the truth, even if it is only until I wake up."

Jass' eyes burn with the fire of a thousand suns. The luminous sparks of gold that rim his dark irises remind me of two perfect solar eclipses; it's as if the light behind the darkness that has consumed him is constantly trying to escape, to

win him over somehow. He holds out his hand, offering it to me. I look down at it, quailing a little. "You don't need me to hold your hand. You brought us here without having to touch me."

"I know," he says, smirking recklessly. "I just want to hold it. Stop looking at me like I'm about to shoot you. If I wanted to kill you, I would have destroyed that escape pod on the Invictus."

I don't know what possesses me—it could be that I feel like I need to prove something to him, or it could be that I simply want to touch him, too—but I find myself putting my hand into his. A flood of adrenalin washes through me, warning me of danger, telling me I should do whatever I can to escape this predator. It's also telling me to hold onto him tight. To never let him go. I feel like I'm getting whiplash, just standing next to him.

Jass threads his fingers through mine, holding onto me tightly. "You're sure you want to see?" he asks.

"You didn't think I'd say yes, did you? You thought I'd refuse, and now you're wondering how you're going to make up something so convincing that I believe—"

The world tips sideways. One second, we're standing in the med center, surrounded by stark, cold lighting and walls filled with medical equipment. The next, I'm tumbling over, my body rolling, and my hand is ripped free from Jass'. I'm

falling, spinning, cartwheeling end over end, and it hurts. I keep hitting the ground, plummeting down a slope, and every time I spin my vision flashes green, then yellow, then blue. Green, then yellow, then blue. Green, then yellow, then blue. A sharp pain lances me in the ribcage. I cry out, panic beginning to set in, but then there are hands on me, stopping me, pulling me back. I'm sitting up, covered in dust and blood, and Jass is whispering urgently in my ear.

"It's okay, Reza. I've got you. I've got you." His fingers dig into my skin as he clutches me. He's holding me from behind, my back resting up against his chest, and his legs are splayed either side of mine. We're sitting on a steep, rocky slope that leads down to a broad expanse of beach. The day is fresh and beautiful. In the sky, a single sun burns, hanging directly over our heads, signalling that it's midday. It's been a long time since I've seen so much water; it takes me a moment to process the view in front of me.

"Where are we?" I gasp, pressing the heel of my hand into my side. Hopefully it'll stop hurting soon, and I'll be able to take a proper breath. Jass takes my hand and removes it, replacing it with his own. He rubs in small, tight circles, clearly not paying attention to what he's doing. The Jass Beylar I knew of back on the Invictus would never show such care to another living being.

“Home,” he says. “I remember this beach from my childhood. I brought you here about a year after you fled.” Pointing up the beach, Jass gestures to two figures walking toward us. It is us. And it looks like we’re fighting. As the other Jass and Reza get closer, I can see the tears in my eyes. The birthmark on my shoulder is perfectly visible. I can hear the angry lilt and lift of my voice as I yell at Jass. His face is hard. Harder than I’ve ever seen it before. A second ago, just before Jass brought us here, literally turning the world upside down, I was about to accuse him of fabricating this moment, but I can see now that it’s real. No matter how good he is, how talented and skilled at stitching together new realms of reality, he could never create something so perfect and detailed as this.

“What are we arguing about?” I ask.

“The same thing we always argue about,” he replies. His lips are close to my ear. Suddenly, I realize how close we are. Jass seems to realize at the same time. I expect him to pull away first, but he doesn’t. I’m the one to try and scoot forward, out of his reach. His arms lock around me, preventing me from getting away, though. He pulls me back, so the hard packed muscle of his chest presses against my spine and my shoulder blades.

“You were trying to convince me to leave the Construct. To see the error of my ways. As you can

see, my response wasn't the one you were hoping for."

Further up the beach, the other me stops in her tracks. She's furious. Beyond furious. She's hurting. Lashing out, she tries to strike the other Jass, but he grabs hold of her by the wrist, drawing her to him. She falters, her heels digging into the sand for a moment, but then she seems to just...stop fighting. She falls forward into the other Jass' arms, and he crushes her to him. He seems to hesitate for a second. A very brief, short second. Then he's bringing his mouth down onto hers, cupping her face in his hands, and she's sinking into him, kissing him back. It's not a gentle, peaceful, loving kiss. It's a pain-filled, tortured, desperate kiss that looks like it's taking them both unawares. Like neither of them ever expected it would happen in a million years. The other me claws and grabs at Jass' clothing, while he lifts her from her feet. She wraps her legs around his waist, and then he's ripping at her shirt, tearing it from her body.

"Holy fuck..."

"Yeah. I forgot to mention. We had a number of firsts that day," Jass whispers quietly into the back of my neck. I can feel his lips there, pressing lightly against my skin, and I can't hold back the tremor of pleasure that rattles my nerve endings. He's barely touching me, barely kissing me, but it

feels as if my mind is splintering, falling apart.

We watch in silence as our counterparts strip each other naked on the beach. The only thing I can hear besides the roar of the waves crashing onto the beach is my own labored breathing. The Jass sitting behind me slides his hand up the inside of my shirt. I'm paralysed, too confused to know what the fuck to do; he doesn't lift his hand up to my breasts or down, between my legs. He leaves it there, resting against my bare stomach, while he draws slow, intricate patterns into my skin with his fingertips.

Down on the beach, the other Jass sits back, panting, his bare chest rising and falling like crazy. He runs his hands back through his hair, shaking his head, as if trying to gather his wits about him. The other me, a Reza I can't even begin to comprehend—an unashamed, naked Reza, laying on her back in the sand, with her legs wrapped around Jass' waist again—leans up and takes Jass' hand, placing it on her breast. I wanted him. In that moment, it's plain to see that I wanted him, just as I want him now. Gods, how did this get so damned confusing?

The Jass sitting behind me groans softly under his breath. He's getting turned on by what's happening, and I can't even be mad at him. The truth is, I'm struggling to keep my cool, too. The way we're looking at each other, stroking each

other, touching each other, kissing each other...it's more than I can take.

"We should go," I whisper. The energy inside me is flaring, reaching out, trying to connect with the energy inside Jass. The tether wants to strengthen, and what better way for that to happen than to mirror what are other selves are doing? Jass is hard. I can feel his cock pressing up against the small of my back, and it takes everything I have not to twist around in his arms and ask him to touch me. I'm burning up. I'm soaking wet. I want him so badly, I can't even think straight.

Jass groans again, louder this time. He bites down gently, his teeth pressing into the skin at the back of my neck, and I almost break. I can't...I can't stop myself... I....

The light disappears. The beach disappears. The other Jass and Reza disappear. All of it, suddenly gone. What the fuck? My Jass is still behind me, breathing hard, his hand still drawing circles onto my stomach. His erection's still digging into my back, demanding attention. Everything is darkness, though. Everything is quiet. Everything is...void. The endlessness of this place should be frightening to me, but somehow it isn't. It's comforting and familiar. I know I've been here with him before, in this nothingness, and I know I've been safe, even if I can't remember it.

"We should have stayed," Jass rumbles, his

voice vibrating beneath his ribcage. It vibrates through me, too, right through my back. "We put on quite a show, I think."

I flush bright red, and I know Jass can tell. He doesn't need the light to see my crimson cheeks. My embarrassment and need is so powerful that he must be able to feel it through our connection, as loud and obvious as an alarm bell blaring out into the silence.

"I need to wake up," I say. "I can't stay with you forever."

Jass kisses my neck again, and my resolve takes another hit. We've already had sex in our dreams. We've already touched and kissed each other's bodies. I've already succumbed to the darkest, most shameful need I could ever possibly have. What would be the harm—

"Don't worry. I'll let you wake up," Jass pants. "Even though my dick's going to hate me almost as much as you do."

"I don't hate you." The words rush out of my mouth before I can stop them. Jass laughs softly down his nose, as though he doesn't believe me. Not for one split second. It is true, though. I know it, here, in this place. I might be sad because of him. I might be afraid of him occasionally. I might be disappointed in the things he says and does, but I don't hate him. I never have.

Hating him would be easier. Instead, there's a

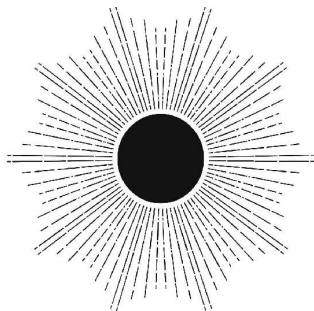
kernel of something very dangerous hiding away inside me.

I frown, the faintest of memories teasing me, tickling the very back of my mind. "You said we were arguing because I wanted you to leave The Construct. That's what the Pirians want me to do now. Convince you to help us."

"I'm not surprised. They must be optimists, like you. They probably think that if they have you say the right words in the right order, those words will somehow change me on a fundamental level."

"It's not going to work, is it?"

Brushing my hair back over my shoulder, Jass gathers it in his hands and winds it in a knot around his hand. I can't see his face, but I can feel his mood, turbulent and brooding. "No. It won't. I'm afraid it's going to take a little more than that."



TEN

JASS

FARREN

Now

When I wake, it's dark, and I'm turned around. I didn't die? The neurotoxins in that dart didn't paralyze me? I am not restrained. I'm lying on my back, my hands stacked one on top of the other, my ankles stacked in the same way, too, and my head is resting on a soft pillow. My body is warm, relaxed and comfortable, but my face feels fucking freezing. I sit up, brushing my hands over my body, frowning when I realize I'm underneath the covers in a bed that is not my own. My ribs protest violently at my movement, but I do my best to ignore it, researching my surroundings. I'll allow

myself the luxury of pain later. I'll allow myself the luxury, and then I'll obliterate the discomfort with some Light. Easy. I get up, clutching the rough bandage that's been tied haphazardly around my chest. The soles of my feet are cold against the stone floor, and a chilled breeze winds its fingers around my bare ankles.

My shirt is gone. So are my boots. My pants have been neatly folded and placed on a rickety chair beside the bed. Pulling them on is difficult to say the least. Every time I twist or pivot, a spasm rips through me, tight and painful, stealing my breath. I became intimately acquainted with pain under Stryker's watchful eye. He made sure I knew every facet and dimension of it when they first brought me onto the Invictus, long before the ship was destroyed by the people of Darax. I eventually learned how to embrace agony and make it my friend. It took time, but I did it. If the threat of pain doesn't scare you beyond all reckoning, then no one can hold it over you, after all. That doesn't mean that the stabbing sensation in my side and my chest is any fun, though. Once my pants are buttoned, I take a moment to assess my surroundings further. I'm in a cell-like room with a low ceiling and no window. The walls are constructed of mismatched stone. Sand has crept through the cracks, shoring up in miniature mountains in each of the four corners. The bed and

the chair are the only pieces of furniture in here. No rug to protect my feet from the icy cold floor. No bookcases, or side tables, and no overhead light fitting. A small light glows dimly from the wall opposite the bed, casting out a muted yellow glow—barely enough light to see by. A low, gentle humming sound reaches my ears; there must be a solar generator somewhere close by. Interesting.

With no shirt, socks or boots, and no other means of staving off the bitter cold, I take the thin blanket from the cot and I wrap it around my shoulders. Now, to figure out the lock on the door. It'll take me less than a second to have it open, and then I'll be out of here and on my way to find the girl. And if I have to leave a trail of dead bodies in my wake in order to get out of here, wherever *here* is, then so be it.

I place my hand on the door latch and I cast out the borders of my mind, focusing on the mechanism that's holding me prisoner. It'll be easy to crack the lock. So goddamn easy. Only...there is no lock. No mechanism inside of the handle at all. The round, rusted piece of iron doesn't even turn properly. It's merely there as a means of pushing and pulling the thin piece of wood open and closed again. *I haven't been locked in here?* The past twenty-four hours have been strange indeed, but this? Being trusted to roam freely beyond the confines of this room, amongst my enemy? That's

just madness.

I yank the door open, finding myself in a long, narrow corridor, marked every five or six feet by another dim lamp attached to the rough chiseled walls. I search with my mind, scanning the corridor both to the left and the right, hunting for potential threats. A vast, seemingly endless network of tunnels lies beyond where I stand. And people. So *many* people, each one different and unusual. There are many diverse voices here. I'm not used to the uproar of so many minds speaking all at once. The furor of a million thoughts and desires all echoing inside my head is almost too much to bear. I slam down my guard, protecting myself, reeling a little as I lean against the wall to catch my breath. The Nexus was teeming with energy, day and night, a constant hive of activity. There was no real life there, though. Construct soldiers are all of one mind. One goal. One purpose. They're brainwashed from a young age to eradicate such tiresome traits as free will and individual thought. I'm not used to so many distinctive voices calling out into the void, shouting and clamoring all at once, as if completely ignorant of the din they're creating. It's disorienting to say the least. With my guard in place, my head spins a little less crazily, but I can still sense the vibration of all that energy trembling through the air, biting at me, making the hairs on the back of my arms stand on end. Seven hells, this how does

anyone ever sleep down here? I'm sure I only managed to because I was sedated.

I start making a list in my head. I have to get out of here, and in order to that I need to find clothes. A mode of transportation. A means of finding Reza. I only opened my mind to this strange, new place for a few seconds, but it was long enough to know she's not here. She's in a place like this, very similar, but many miles away. Far, but within reach if I focus all of my efforts in her direction. *North. North. North.* I know which way I have to go. The word pulses inside me, pounding like the rhythm of a demented drum. If I head north, I'll find her. As I draw closer, I'll know exactly where to go and how to get to her. It feels as if the universe itself is drawing us together, like super charged magnets, destroying everything in their path, unable to resist the pull that forces them together. She feels the same way I do. When she lies in bed at night, that same insistent attraction rips her from her dreams. That's why she calls out to me, and why I built those dreamscapes for her in the first place.

“Ah. You're awake. About damn time.”

I spin around, breathless. The maelstrom of emotions that overtook me a second ago vanishes, leaving behind an empty, hollow abyss. Col stands in the corridor, carrying a small tray in one hand and a pair of boots in the other. *My boots.* Clean

and polished. There are crew members on The Nexus who are meant to prepare my clothes, shine my boots and clean my quarters. I've always refused their terrified offers of help, though. I prefer working the cloth into the leather of my boots myself. The mindlessness of such a rote task is an escape of sorts. I can switch off instead of constantly analyzing, scanning, assessing and calculating. Every night, when I sit on the end of my bed, working the polishing cloth in tight circles, I can switch *everything* off. I can just...be.

Col thrusts the boots out at me, slamming them into my chest. An incredibly fake smile stretches across his face, tight around the corners of his eyes. Unpleasant. "You nearly killed me," he says airily. "Thanks for the extra broken rib. Could have done without that."

I take the boots, scowling. "You're welcome. Next time you'll know better."

"I don't normally blaspheme, but I'm beginning to think the seers were wrong about you, Jass Beylar. They have to be high. Or maybe the water supply's contaminated down here or something. There could be an explanation for all of this, but personally I'm struggling to believe you're a redeemable type of guy. And the idea that we're going to be friends is, well..." He scoffs, his head rocking back on his shoulders. He seems exhausted. There are dark circles beneath his eyes, and his skin

is drawn and ashy. He probably needs a good sleep and a blood transfusion, but instead he's here, alone, hurling abuse at me in a hallway.

I rub the sore point at the back of my neck. "Who was your friend? The one who shot me? And where might I find him?"

Col laughs under his breath. "He's one of the surface sentries. He's gone back to his duties. I sent him to another outpost, where you wouldn't be tempted to hunt him down and hurt him."

"Clever." I would have done exactly that. I would have kicked the guy's teeth down his throat for daring to tranq me. Shame Col's thought ahead. I could really use a punching bag right now. "Is that food for me?" I ask, eyeing the tray in his hand. Two small rolls of bread, some cheese, a strange looking fruit and a tall glass of water sit on top of the tray, the purple and green orb, a fruit I've never seen before, rolling all over the place whenever Col moves. Col sighs, obviously disgusted, holding out the tray to me. "You'd better eat fast. The chancellor of this sector is coming to tell us who we need to meet with next. We're not welcome here, apparently. Your presence in the sub city is causing a great deal of unrest amongst the higher ups. Can't say I'm surprised."

I take the tray from him, my stomach twisting—I had no idea how hungry I was until I smelled the food. Hunger is a base bodily response that

doesn't normally trouble me. Construct ration packs are small but loaded with absolutely everything the body needs. One every five or six hours is more than enough to fuel a man. And on the rare occasion that a raiding party takes a little longer than anticipated and I find myself without food, the constant, if small, dose of Light I have flowing through my system at all times staves off any appetite I might have. It's been a long time since I've looked at a plate of food and felt any sort of excitement over the prospect of eating it. "I didn't ask to come here, Pakka. I didn't ask to be drugged and taken. As far as I'm concerned, we can leave as soon as we have the information we require. Where is my bag?"

Col frowns, head tilting a little to the left. "Bag?" A dawning realization transforms his expression. "Oh. Right. The bag you were looking for when you left me to suffocate in the biggest storm this planet's seen in a generation. It must have burned up in the crash. The apprentices who went out to search for salvage said there was nothing but ash and fused plasticast left of your ship. Sorry about that." He doesn't sound sorry at all. He sounds like he doesn't give a shit, which makes me want to punch my hand right through his face.

No bag. There is no bag. Which means no Light. Which means...

I shudder, not wanting to consider that yet. I dosed two days ago; less than a full forty-eight hours have passed since I pressed the stem needle into my arm and I allowed myself to float away on the cloud of bliss that followed. That means I have at least another full day before it feels like my veins are hardening beneath my skin. One day to find the girl and take her with me, away from this arid, bland, featureless planet. Is it possible that I'll be able to find some Light down here on Pirius?

Doubtful. The Construct created the drug in their labs, tinkering and toying until they perfected the formula to stimulate the body and the mind in equal parts. I have no idea what goes in it, and neither did the lab techs on The Nexus. I questioned them a number of times, scouring their minds when they claimed they didn't have the information I requested, and they were telling the truth.

Shipments of the individual compounds that went into the Light arrived in random, varying intervals, and in random, varying amounts. Unlabeled and unmarked other than a process number stamped into the vial lids, the separate ingredients were combined in small flasks, heated to a high temperature, then refrigerated for a period of seventy-two hours. I could have taken some of the Light I stole from the labs and had it processed, picking it apart on a molecular level, but unlike The Nexus crew, the ship itself was not something I

could easily manipulate. It's one thing wiping someone's mind, or forcing them to unwittingly turn a blind eye, but every single diagnostic run on board the Construct's primary base is automatically recorded and sent to the elders. Perfect record keeping, by very suspicious minds. I wouldn't have even had the opportunity to delete the scan data before Regis knew what I was up to.

I force the thoughts of Light from my mind. There's nothing I can do about it right now. Best to deal with the situation at hand and go from there. I slam my bare feet inside my boots one at a time, and then I take the cheese and bread from the tray, handing the rest back to Col. "Who is this chancellor? And when can we leave?" I don't mind the sensation of being underground; I can tell we're deep below the planet's surface. After being on a spacecraft so many cycles, I no longer suffer from the feeling of being trapped as I used to when I was first taken by the Construct. But on The Nexus, there were view ports. Thousands of them, each one offering a different snapshot out into the infinite stretches of space that surrounded us in every possible direction. Here in the sub city, as Col called it, my view of the universe is very limited indeed.

"Chancellor Farren runs this sector. And he's not very friendly." Col's face, his downturned mouth, and the deep line between his gathered

brows says he's had dealings with the guy before and he clearly doesn't care for him too much. "He won't know anything beyond who we're meant to meet next, so there's no point torturing him," he adds quickly. "There's no point hurting anyone else from this point out. It won't get you to your destination any quicker."

The determined, persistent part of me disagrees with that statement. Torturing someone always helps get you to your destination quicker, even if the other person doesn't know where that is. The ignition codes to a cruiser; local currency; weapons; extra intel that might help you along the road: all of these things could potentially assist us in reaching the girl quicker. I stuff the bread and cheese into my mouth, startled momentarily by the texture of it. Construct rations are hard, chewy, and frankly more pleasant if you swallow them whole and then forget about them. The bread Col gave me is soft and doughy, buttery in my mouth. The cheese is sharp and tangy, making the sides of my tongue buzz with its unusual flavor.

Col supplies me with a tight, warm black shirt he was carrying for me in his back pocket, and then stands silently with his hands balled into fists, leaning against the wall while I pace up and down, grumbling to myself. All this waiting is making me stir crazy. How many nights have I spent thinking about Reza? How many days have I spent fighting

the urge to abandon my post, to head out in my raptor alone to track her down? So many more than I can count. I could never sense her back then in the same way I can now. During the hours I was awake, I knew she was alive, and occasionally I got a glimpse of her thoughts and emotions. At night, it was easier. She called out to me, and I was able to create a place for us to come together. I never knew her exact location, though. She still managed to shield parts of herself from me. Now, I can feel her presence like a burning white-hot poker flaring inside my mind. If I close my eyes, I can feel her thoughts as if they were shadows of my own. Memories. Her hopes and her fears, elusively dancing on the outskirts of my consciousness, only a hair's breadth away. It's as if a veil has fallen, a shield dropped, and she's being revealed to me little by little.

Strange.

Chancellor Farren is dour, cold, and panic-filled. I immediately don't like him based on the simple fact that he reeks of fear. Not a specific fear, over any one thing. A general, constant fear that affects his thoughts and his actions on a base level. The very worst kind of fear that, in the end, is always a man's undoing.

"The coordinates are on here," he says, handing Col a lit up green data chip. Col slips the inch-square chip into his pocket without checking

it. Farren sneers at me out of the corner of his eye. “The woman you’re looking for is called Ayah. She’s a storekeeper in the bazaar on Sellarue. She has the next piece of your puzzle. I don’t know what this business is about, but I know it’s *bad* business, Col Pakka. Who is he?” Farren says, jerking his head in my direction. “Erika sent word that the Commonwealth dispatched him here, but he isn’t Commonwealth.”

“He’s just a man,” Col answers stiffly. “He’s here to help us.”

Ha! *Help us*. And here I was thinking Col wasn’t even remotely funny.

“I’m no fool,” Farren growls. “This has something to do with those duel visions Erika’s been harping on about, cycle after cycle, I know it does. No one believes her anymore, Col. They think she’s a mad woman, preaching about the end of the world.”

“Plenty of people believe my mother’s visions, myself included,” Col fires back.

Farren grunts, his top lip curling upward. “Erika isn’t your birth mother. She’s not your blood. You’re not Pirian, *Pakka*. You have as much right to be here as *he* does.” Farren sends a withering glance in my direction. I raise my head and meet his gaze, my eyes conveying very little, and yet Farren immediately looks away, clearing his throat.

“Erika’s time as chancellor is coming to an end, as well you know. Soon, it won’t matter what she’s seen. Soon, someone else will take her place. All of the scenarios she predicted will be altered. Nothing’s permanent. Just like the surface of our ever-changing, ever-shifting home, the future’s not set. Who knows what’ll happen once she’s gone?”

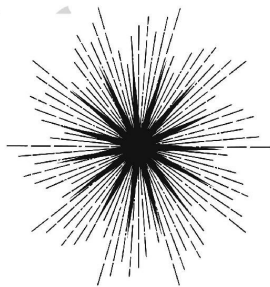
I angle my head, turning my attention back to Col. This is interesting. It sounds as if his mother, his *adopted* mother, is about to step down or be overthrown from her seat of power. Col never mentioned he had ties to someone with pull. He also never mentioned that the seers’ prophecies aren’t foolproof and are susceptible to change.

Col clenches his jaw. “You’re right, Farren. But until that day arrives, my mother’s word is gospel. And like any other good son, I’ll obey her.” He turns on his heel and shoves his way past me, body leaning forward, desperate to get away from the other man at all costs. I am left behind with the chancellor for a moment. I close the gap, so there are only a few inches left between him and me, and I study his facial features. Pronounced brow with a line of high ridges; thin upper lip; narrow, hooded eyes. This man’s misery has been life-long, etched into his bone structure and the lines that contour his skin.

“You were born reaching for power,” I whisper to him, “and you’ll die still failing to grasp hold of

it. I don't need to be a seer to know *that*."

I turn and follow after Col. The voices of the many millions residing here in the sub-city come rushing at me like a tidal wave, flooding the walkways, filling the corridors from top to bottom. This time, they don't consume me, though. This time, they flow around me, making room for me.



ELEVEN

REZA

NIGHTCREEPER

“I can’t do this. I *can*’t. I just...I’m not who you think I am. I can’t force people to bend to my will. I’m just a girl who ran way from the Construct. The galaxy’s full of people who ran away from the Construct. Why should I be any different?”

Darius spins the staff he’s holding around in his hand, pacing slowly around the small, circular training room he’s brought me to. Overhead, a narrow slit window in the roof allows a tall, angled pillar of light to filter down and hit the dirt floor. Dust motes spin and eddy inside the shaft of light, revealing just how choked the air is down here.

“Other people aren’t special simply because they aren’t special. You’re special simply because you *are*. The universe leads us all on our own

paths. There's no reasoning your way out of it, Reza. Our visions ceased the moment you arrived here. We've been able to see for centuries, and then you came and everything stopped. That's no coincidence. While you're just a girl, a simple girl, there's something hibernating within you that makes you remarkable. We need to awaken those skills and fast. One way or another."

I don't like how he says that. He's already struck me with his staff twice on left side and once on my right; I'm going to be black and blue and covered in bruises by the end of the day. If he feels justified in going further than he already has, I'm going to have to start striking back. I haven't wasted my time here on Pirius. I've been learning how to fight, how to survive, and I've gotten pretty damn good at it. I don't want to hurt Darius. The seer's been kinder to me than anyone else I've encountered since I escaped from the Construct. But still...I can only take so much of a beating before I'll defend myself.

Two days ago, I spent a solid eighteen hours with Erika, practicing how to defend my mind—a difficult task, since Erika can't read me in the first place, and so I left her sparse library feeling dissatisfied and anxious, unsure if her training will actually accomplish anything when the time comes.

I'm meant to be finessing what I learned with

Erika and incorporating it into the physical training I'm receiving from Darius now, but the past two days have felt pointless and underwhelming. I can block most of Darius' attacks, but it takes concentration to try and maintain the mental guard Erika taught me how to build at the same time. Facing someone like Jass Beylar, someone who's been endlessly trained and honed into a deadly weapon? I *am* going to die. There's no two ways about it. He's a fierce, experienced predator. My skills are akin to that of a newborn creature, barely able to stand yet, let alone walk.

"You won't have to fight Beylar," Darius informs me. "Not yet, anyway. Erika's sure of that. There'll be time to finesse and learn. However..."

"However?"

"I've created something for you. A way out. A safeguard, in case the sand does end up shifting beneath our feet. My hope is that it will keep you safe."

"What is it?"

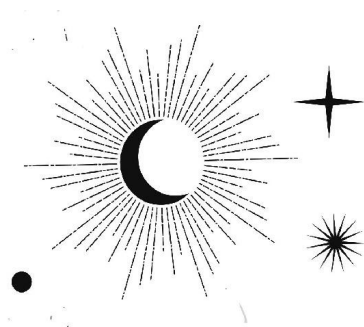
Darius reaches into his robes and withdraws something, clasping it tightly. He opens his fist, and in his palm: a small black capsule. It looks harmless enough, but it isn't. Darius is a master healer here in the sub city. He's also a master poisoner. His skills are unparalleled. Commonwealth fighters from all over the galaxy commission him to make suicide pills for them, which can be ingested in a

moment's notice if they are captured. He holds the capsule between his index finger and his thumb, holding it up for me to see.

“Nightcreeper,” he says gravely. “Incredibly hard to come by. Even harder to diagnose. Impossible to cure. You swallow this and there’s no coming back for you, child.”

An awful sense of foreboding digs its claws into my back. “If it’s so deadly, how is it possibly meant to keep me safe?”

“Beylar’s hungry for something. You must have something he needs,” Darius says. His voice echoes around the inside of the training room. “But how can he claim it from you, if you’re no longer alive?”



TWELVE

JASS

SELLARUE

We journey for days. There are no modes of transportation in the sub city, so we walk, winding our way through the narrow tunnels, passing countless Pirians who stare at us with wide-eyed surprise. Off-worlders aren't common here. Pirius is one of the last bastions of the Commonwealth, one of the few remaining planets still free from Construct control; outsiders are apparently not that welcome or anticipated. There are no drones or robotics, either. Screens mounted into the tunnel systems flicker and strobe, displaying public announcements in a strange glyph type language I can't read, but aside from that there are very few signs of technology. According to Col, the sand storms that rage for days on the surface of the

planet disrupt electronics of any kind, and prevent signals from being sent altogether. I'm not sure if he's aware of it or not, but this is the only reason any of these people are still alive. The Construct uses highly sensitive instruments to detect advanced civilizations. If any of the fleet's exploration vessels had found a significant power signature on Pirius, a team would have been sent down here to root out and destroy whatever they found.

As time passes, Col begins to lead us down, the tunnels burrowing deep into the bedrock of the planet. I keep track of where we go, mentally recording each turn and hairpin, making sure I can find my way out of this maze if the need arises. Eventually, we arrive at Sellarue. It isn't a town, as I might have expected, but a large cavern that opens out, filled with people. The place is bustling, a market of sorts, packed from end to end with stalls and shops that stretch back into alcoves in the rock that borders the perimeter of the cavern. Col is stared at down here less than I am. Some of the Pirians even know his name and greet him as we wind our way through the madness.

Eyes bounce off me, as if the people know I am something not to be observed. As if even glancing in my direction causes them pain in some way.

At the far end of the bazaar, we enter into a

dark alcove filled with polished crystals, shining plates made out of silver and gold, along with lamps that seem to burn without the need of fire or external energy source. A tall, slender woman with tattoo-covered hands greets us with a frightened smile. She rushes to the entrance of her shop and draws a pair of curtains, blocking out the hubbub beyond.

“Ayah,” Col says, greeting her. “This is—”

“I know who he is,” she answers quickly. Her eyes are blacker than coal, too large for her face. Her hair is white like all the other Pirians, braided on top of her head. A shard of bone hangs from a chain on her right ear, fragile and small. It looks like it once belonged to some kind of bird. She narrows her eyes at me, interlocking her hands into a knot of long fingers. “Chancellor Pakka sent word. She said we’re not to even mention his name out loud. As far as anyone on Pirius is meant to know, your *friend*,” she says, tripping over the word, “is a member of the Commonwealth, here to give aid. People have been talking about his arrival.”

Farren said as much. Smart. Without my Construct uniform, I could be anyone. I *am* human. I could easily be a Commonwealth fighter like Col, come bringing news and goods to trade. It’s strange that Erika would tell Ayah my true identity and not Farren, though. Ayah clears her throat, standing a

little straighter. She's afraid of me, but not as much as she should be. There's a strength to her that I admire.

"There's a problem with your next rendezvous point," she says quietly. "Erika's recalled you to her sector. She's asked that you go there directly."

I feel the immediate tension that coils in Col's belly. These rendezvous points have been the only thing keeping him alive thus far. "We weren't meant to meet in the first sector," he says, shooting me a cautious glance. "I wasn't supposed to know our end destination until we arrived."

Ayah twists the bone dangling from ear. "Your final point of contact got cold feet. He didn't want *him* anywhere his family. People are flocking to the second sector from outside the sub city, already looking for accommodations for the eclipse celebrations. He refused to put anyone in danger. There was nothing to be done. Erika chose to respect his wishes."

I don't even try to hide my smile. "Looks like you're surplus to requirement now, Pakka. I can probably find my way to the first sector by myself."

"You'd do well to stick with your guide," Ayah says sharply. "There'll be consequences if he doesn't make it back to his mother."

Consequences. The idea that I might suffer for killing Col is laughable. I'm intrigued by the woman's confidence, though. I look into her mind.

Her body tenses, her hand stilling on her earring. She doesn't fight me, though. She allows me to search through her memories, hunting for the information I require. She even helps, forcing it to the front of her mind.

The girl. Reza's made a bargain. The safe return of Col, and the safety of everyone else here on Pirus. And in exchange, she won't resist me. She'll meet with me, of her own volition. If anyone is injured by my hand, she'll kill herself and that'll be the end of it.

"She's assuming a lot," I say airily. "Why would she think I value her life so much?"

Ayah smiles, and her teeth are a brilliant white. "Come, Mr. Construct. Let's not play such silly games."

We're met at the first sector by another chancellor, this time Col's own mother. She exudes the calm control of a woman used to power and respect. After embracing Col and cupping his face in her hands, smiling up at him, she turns her smile on me, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm very glad you're here, Jass. I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

This is far from what I expected. There is no subterfuge to her words. Her sincerity is very real,

and I find I'm not really sure what to say back to her. After a moment's thought, I say the obvious. "I'm sure you're the only person in the sub city who feels that way, Chancellor Pakka."

She places a hand on my shoulder, benevolence and kindness shining from her—a golden halo only I can see. "As you know by now, the Pirian people haven't been able to access their visions, but I have an excellent memory. I saw what was going to happen here before I was blinded to the universe. It made me hopeful. I've been looking forward to this day for seven cycles."

She's still touching me, her hand burning into me like a hot brand. I would be less uncomfortable right now if she were making threats to my life instead of looking at me like I am her own personal savior. "I'm not sure what you saw, but time must have warped your visions, Chancellor."

"Please. Call me Erika."

I slowly incline my head. "I'm here for Reza, Erika. Nothing more. Nothing less. She promised me an audience. She also promised me she'd submit herself to me. The moment I discover she wasn't true to her word—"

"Reza's an honest person. She keeps her promises. You'll recall she also swore she'd take her own life if you didn't conduct yourself civilly. You have no reason to doubt her."

She's right. I don't. The very first time I saw

Reza, she was preoccupied with the messy business of dying. I commanded her not to and she obliged, but I saw the resolve in her eyes. I knew she meant it. Didn't see it as an act of cowardice. It was an act of bravery on her part, where she took control back from the Construct. She'd definitely do it again.

I don't like the idea of Reza bleeding out from her wrists. I shove the memory of her lying on the grating, her face a mask of death, out of my head entirely. "You don't seem to have any issue looking at me, Chancellor. I can't say the same of everyone else down here."

"Looking into the eye of a storm takes practice. My people aren't used to the idea of you, Jass. They sense your otherness, even if they don't know why or who you are. They don't know how to decipher the chaos. I've had plenty of time to study you inside my own head and in my dreams. Our visions are powerful things."

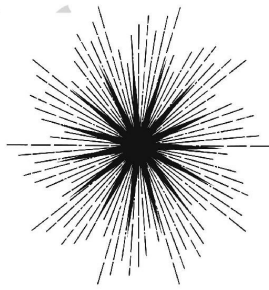
"And sometimes wrong, I hear."

Erika isn't fazed by my comment. Her composure is unsettling. "Not these visions," she says confidently. "These visions were indelible. A dye already cast, events simply waiting for their time to come to fruition. You'll see. You'll learn." She beams at me, so self-assured, but I catch the flicker of doubt that twists Col's features. He doesn't believe as strongly as his mother, no matter what he said to Farren. He might have done before

he met me, but now...

“The only thing I need to learn is when I’ll see the girl,” I reply.

Erika nods. “She knows you’re here. She’s been told she can come to you if she wishes. In the meantime, why don’t you rest?”



THIRTEEN

REZA

A BOY...

My heart's stumbling around the inside of my chest. I stand on the other side of the door to the ready room, my head bowed, the tips of my fingers numb. I can't seem to gather myself together. This is important. Erika managed to impress on me how crucial this meeting is. If I don't manage to make some sort of headway here with Jass, the Construct will arrive in time for the next double eclipse, and they'll eradicate this outpost. There will be so much death and destruction. Jass will become unstoppable force of evil in the galaxy. And as for me? Erika didn't say what would happen to me if the Construct showed up at Pirius, but I can imagine. Jass will rise to power and madness. He won't let them kill me. He'll harness the energy inside me, and use it to control me. I'll be his slave,

doomed to carry out his bidding, trapped inside my own body, unable to prevent the death that will befall so many worlds. I will kill over and over again, and I'll be unable to look away.

I hate him.

I fear him.

I must somehow change him.

Col, my friend for the last seven cycles, places a hand on my back, rubbing in small circles. "I don't know how this is going to play out, Reza. I don't know if there's a way to reason with him, let alone a way to win him over. He refused to tell me what he wanted with you. I don't think he has any plans to enslave you, though."

Technically, his words should reassure me, but I'm damned if they don't have the opposite affect entirely. "I can come in with you, if you like?" he offers. "Jass is a caustic bastard, but I've kind of gotten used to him over the past few days. There's a trick to dealing with him. Don't show him your fear. He's like a blood horse. If he knows you're intimidated by him, he'll discount you right out of hand. If you have nerves of steel and you show him *that* instead, there'll be a better chance of him listening to what you have to say to him."

Listening. Listening to me, not killing me. That sounds like a much better option. Am I capable of achieving what Col is telling me to do, though? Can I set aside this ingrained fear and aversion? Can I

hide how terrified I am that the day I've dreaded and panicked over for so long has finally arrived, just as I always knew, deep down, that it would? I don't think I'm that good at pretending.

"Honestly. I really don't mind coming in with you, if you like." Col's kind smile says he means it.

"I'll be okay. I think. I hope. But if you hear screaming..."

"I'll be sure to break the door down, weapons blazing."

"Thank you, Col." I take a deep breath, hand pressed lightly on the ready room's access panel. A little more pressure and the door will slide soundlessly open, and I will be faced with one of my worst nightmares. Before I go, I turn and ask Col one last question. "You showed him you weren't afraid of him. You were alone with him for four days. He could have killed you at any point with nothing more than a thought, and you didn't falter. How did *you* do it? How were you able to overcome your fear?"

Col lets out a loud, bold laugh, his head rocking back, the muscles in his throat working. His blue eyes, completely contrasting with the dark, almost black eyes of the seers and their people, shining brightly.

"I didn't, Reza. I didn't at all. But somehow I managed to pull the wool over his eyes. The truth is I was shitting myself the entire time."

A boy...

No, a *man* sits in a chair. He's alone. His mop of dark hair waves wildly all over the place, thick and untamable. His eyes are dark, too. Dark brown, like molten chocolate, flecked with gold and caramel. Warm. Alive. Very intense. Beneath his eyes: a long, arrow-straight nose, and full lips that are pressed together. His cheekbones are high. Higher than they normally would be on a boy, but they somehow suit him. His face is all angles—severe, and yet soft at the same time. I expected to be shot through with the urgent need to run when I first laid eyes on him, and yet I'm struck by how *normal* he looks. He is, for all intents and purposes, just a man. I've seen him before, back on the *Invictus*, but in brief snatches. No more than a few seconds here and a few seconds there. When I look at him now, I know his face intimately, way better than I ought to. It's as if I've spent hours with him. Days, even. Only, I haven't.

He straightens in his chair when he sees me, his shoulders pulling back, his chin lifting, a tightness taking hold of him, and I feel it, too. A sort of cord being pulled taut inside me, vibrating like the plucked string of a musical instrument.

"You're late," he says stiffly. "They said you'd

come and see me two hours ago.”

I retort without thinking. “Sorry. It’s very busy around here. I couldn’t just drop what I was doing and come running.”

Jass’ mouth twitches imperceptibly, but I catch the movement. “You wanted to,” he says slowly. “I could feel it.”

The worrying thing is, I *did* want to. I’ve been so caught up and confused by what I’ve been feeling over the past couple of days. So many raging emotions all vying to be front and center of attention. It’s been hard to differentiate between them all. I can’t deny it, though. I felt it the moment that apprentice ran into the hall and told us Col had arrived with Jass. I wanted to go to him immediately, like I was rushing to meet an old friend. I wanted to barrel over here, blindly, without a single thought to what might take place, and I have absolutely no idea why. I take a step into the room, my palms sweating at the prospect of actually moving close enough to him to sit down in the chair opposite his. He’s unrestrained. There is no phase-proof glass between us. The only thing protecting me is his word that he won’t harm me, and how far can *that* be trusted? God, this was so stupid.

“You’re exactly as I remember,” Jass says quietly. “Your hair. Your eyes. Your freckles. That birthmark on your shoulder.” He points to the small

mark that indeed sits upon my right shoulder, and I suddenly feel naked. The vest I was training in covers me sufficiently to preserve my modesty, but I'd certainly feel better right now if I were wearing a proper shirt.

"You look nothing like I remember," I fire back.

His head cocks to one side. Interested. Intrigued. "How so?"

"I seem to recall being terrified of you on that ship. You look fairly harmless to me now, though."

It's foolish to tell him he looks harmless. His shoulders are broad, his chest packed with muscle. His hands, resting in front of him on the table's surface, palm down, are strong and capable. His dark eyes are sharp and focused, studying and assessing. An air of defiance, challenge and confidence issues from him in overwhelming waves that threaten to overcome me. No, he isn't harmless in the least. He's still the most dangerous man in the galaxy; I know that just from the way my heart is racing right now. Jass smiles slowly, tapping his index finger against the table. It's as if he knows something I don't. "A lot has changed between us since the *Invictus*."

"Nothing's changed," I volley back. "You're still the Construct's plaything. You still hurt people and cause them to suffer. You're a faceless monster. A night terror. A dark ghost," I whisper.

Jass' eyes glitter with some unknown emotion. He shrugs with his right shoulder only. "As you say."

An intense pressure's building inside my head. I can't seem to think straight. It's as if my skull is pinned in a vice and someone is slowly turning the handle, tightening its grip. I have to speed this process up. I have to get the hell out of here. "I'm sure the Construct's lost more than one soldier in their time. They can't want me back badly enough to train their most prized weapon on me." She huffs, showing her frustration. "Are you trying to claim my energy? Is that it? You've gone to all this trouble to find me because you want to drain me until I'm dead?"

Leaning back in his chair, Jass angles his chin, raising it so the overhead light casts dark shadows across the column of his throat. "The Construct leaders think you're dead. They assumed you were killed in the conflict that broke out after the attack on the Invictus. You wounded Stryker pretty badly. Regardless, you're inconsequential to them. If they suspected you were alive, they might send out a bounty hunter to collect you. Bring you back to The Nexus to make an example of you. They certainly don't like their people escaping and making fools of them by any means. But for one, meaningless girl?" He shakes his head. "They forgot all about you, Reza." My name sounds like a

compromise on his tongue. A foreign and uncomfortable thing. An admission of some sort. The way he says it makes me squirm. “But where the Construct could so easily forget about you, I, on the other hand, could *not*. Yes, I’m interested in your energy,” he confesses. “I don’t want to drain it from you, though. I’m far more interested in what could be accomplished if we were to combine our energies together, voluntarily.”

A chill runs down my spine, as if an icy hand has just grabbed me by the back of my neck. I don’t believe him. I resisted him back on the Invictus. No one else has ever been able to do that. Or at least no records have been kept of anyone doing so. Jass’ power is undisputed. If he knew someone out there could withstand him, could potentially cause issues for him in the future, of course he would want to destroy that person. Why would he willingly allow me to keep my power, if he thought for a second he could take it?

As if he knows what I’m thinking, Jass begins to laugh. Never in my life have I ever imagined what Jass Beylar would look or sound like when he laughed. It seemed like such an improbable event that the thought never even crossed my mind. “For someone so willing to throw their life away, you seem very afraid of being killed,” he says. “What is it? What suicide pact have you made?” His eyes narrow, and I feel that intense needling pressure in

my head again. “Nightcreeper,” he says. “Hmm. I don’t know it. They imbedded the capsule in your back tooth. Makes sense. You can bite down on it if you’re in any danger, way before anyone could dream of stopping you. You see, your mind has high walls, Reza,” he tells me airily. “But I can still get inside, stubborn though you are.”

Damn it. I allowed myself to be distracted. I renew the shield I’ve erected to protect myself, just as Erika taught me, gathering all of my strength and applying it to the task, determined to keep him out. He must not be allowed to gain that kind of power over me. I can’t allow it. If I do, surely it will be easier for him to sneak inside my head the next time he feels like invading my privacy.

Jass’ laughter turns weary. “Your power’s too raw. Untamed and untrained. With enough time, I’ll *always* break through, Reza. I already know the question they sent you in here to ask me. They want me to join them. Help them beat back the Construct. They want me to save the day.”

It’s infuriating that he’s already discovered this information. I was going to try and feel him out, to see if he has absolutely any conscience whatsoever before gently prodding him about his loyalties to the Construct. “Don’t worry,” I snap. “I already know you’re not a save-the-day kind of guy.”

“I was once.” He lunges, grabbing hold of me by the wrist. He spins my arm over, and there,

purple and ugly under the stark white glare from the emergency light overhead, is the scar I made when I tried to kill myself back on the Invictus. Specifically, the time when Jass intervened and prevented me from taking my own life. “I remember these too, y’know. So unsettling. I was in the middle of a briefing with the elders and my stomach turned over in the strangest way. I felt...*unbalanced*. I knew something was wrong. I knew exactly where to go to find you. I knew that if I didn’t come to you immediately, I would feel that same imbalanced sensation forever. I couldn’t allow that to happen. Did you feel me coming to find you? Did you feel the moment everything shifted?”

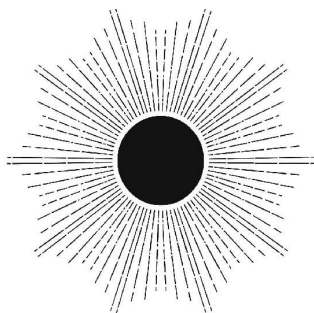
I wrench my arm free, holding onto my wrist under the table, clutching at it like he just snapped the bone. My pulse is out of control, fumbling all over the place, barely pumping my blood around my body. My head is spinning, my chest impossibly tight. “I didn’t feel a thing,” I whisper. “I was dying. I was barely conscious. I’d lost so much blood, I wasn’t even coherent.”

Tutting under his breath, Jass stares at me like he can see right through me. His hair falls in thick, almost black waves down to his shoulders. His eyes are fierce as he scans my face, and another frigid, terrifying judder slams through my body. “*Liar*.” His voice is hushed and quiet, but to my ears it

sounds like a death knoll. “You’re hiding from yourself as much as you’re hiding from me. One of these days, you’re going to have to face the truth. You know it as well as I do. Your life will depend on it.”

My throat feels like it’s closing up. I get to my feet, my legs shaking, barely able to hold me up as I turn and hurry from the room. The door slams closed behind me, and for a moment it’s all I can do to stand there, leaning against the wall, trying not to pass out. Because he’s right. I felt it. No matter how badly I wanted to deny it, that day when Jass came to save my life on board the *Invictus*, I *did* feel the moment everything changed.

And...I liked it.



FOURTEEN

REZA

BACKWARDS

“You need to go back in there. You need to convince him. Did you try and enter his mind like we practiced?” Over the past few days, when I’ve trained with Erika, she’s been consistently polite. Reserved even. Right now, she’s neither of those things. She paces up and down beneath the canopy of stars projected high overhead on the cavern’s roof, wringing her hands. “There’s so little time, Reza. We’re working against the clock. I saw the attack happening during a double eclipse. The next double eclipse to occur takes place in less than a month. I know this is far from easy, but the galaxy hangs in the balance. Sacrifices must be made. I’m sorry to have to push you toward this, to *him*, but the more information we can glean from him, the

better our chances of surviving what's to come."

Sitting at one of the consoles, Col clears his throat. "She gets it, Mother. We all do." He sounds sad. I've never known Col to be anything but happy and carefree, but it's clear something heavy hangs on him. Darius treated him for his injuries at some point last night, and now he barely shows any signs of discomfort at all. There is still a bottomless pain within him, though. Something that runs far deeper than his broken ribs and his bruised muscles. He gets to his feet, and Erika watches as her son approaches her. He cups her face in his hands, and the tension that's been winding her tight since I came to give the report of my meeting with Jass seems to dissipate a little. She sighs, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry. I know what a daunting task this must seem, Reza. I know you're trying to meet the challenges we've set you head on. I apologize for the burden we've placed on your shoulders. This is all...a lot."

That's quite the understatement. The people of this planet have been good to me, though. Since the day I crash-landed here, they've watched over me. Made sure the marauders living in the dunes haven't bothered me. And when I found my feet and learned how to fend for myself, they didn't abandon me. In hindsight, that may well have something to do with my ties to Jass Beylar, that they've been watching me to see what new

information I might be able to shed on the situation that is unfolding now, but at the end of the day these are good people. Kind. Gentle. Peaceful. They wouldn't put me in a dangerous position unless it was absolutely necessary.

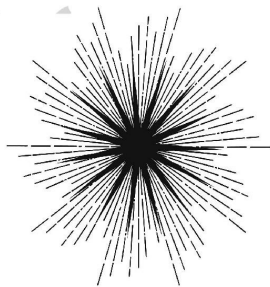
"I'm willing to go back in, Erika. I'm willing to keep trying. I don't think..." I sigh, failing to hide my frustration. "It seems strange, but I don't think he wants to hurt me." Admitting this is a bizarre thing. Even now, with Jass so close at hand, my body feels like it's humming with energy, nervous and ready to run. Every part of me is screaming, demanding that I find the first shuttle leaving Pirus and make sure I'm damn well on it. But, oddly, the moment I consider that as an option, it feels as if I'm being physically torn in two. I want to flee. I want to stay. Sitting there, across from him, it felt like I knew him. I was attracted to him in a very dangerous way. That should *not* have been the case.

Col places a hand on his mother's shoulder. "Jass is a force to be reckoned with, there's no arguing about that. But there's something about him. He's not..." He pauses, frowning, as if he's searching for the right thing to say. "Is it possible that Jass...that if he hadn't been kept under lock and key by the Construct..." He huffs heavily down his nose, shaking his head. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, do you think he *can* change? Is there any

reason for us to believe he can relinquish his Construct training and see the galaxy from another point of view?"

A serene, sad expression flits across Erika's face. She covers her son's hand with her own, squeezing it, and a wave of envy floods me. Erika may not be Col's blood relative, but it's easy to recognize the love that radiates out from her whenever she looks at him. He's her son. It's that simple. My own mother's face is little more than a blurred smudge of color and light to me now. I was far too young the last time I saw her to recall her with any clarity. If I had brothers and sisters back on my home planet, I'll never know. I envy the closeness Col and Erika share beyond belief. I have lived a lifetime of solitude, not knowing what it would be like to share a bond like that. And the loss of it, though never having experienced it, is heartbreaking.

"A ship can fly backwards, son," Erika says. "But it was still designed to press forward, all the same. I don't know if it's possible for Jass Beylar to be something else other than he is. A change like that would be difficult to accomplish. When death, violence and suffering come naturally to a creature, kindness, sacrifice and life itself no longer seem to exist."



FIFTEEN

REZA

DREAMSCAPE

I have sand in my eyes. A storm is building on the horizon, and for some reason I'm walking toward it. My shirt is slick with sweat, my muscles protesting as I steadily climb up the tallest dune I have ever seen. It towers over the surrounding landscape, a steep, grueling incline that I'm intent upon summiting. I'm driven forward, or rather I am pulled forward, one foot planting itself in the loose sand after the other. My lungs are burning with the effort of the climb. It would be nice to sit down and take a rest for a moment, take a drink of water from my canteen, but my body simply won't allow the respite. An unsettling urgency draws me forward. An urgency I can't resist.

At the top of the dune, I see what lies beyond: a broken craft, shattered to pieces and scattered

over miles, black, acrid smoke rising from the wreckage in thick, oily tendrils that reach up to the darkening sky. There's nothing down there in that crash site except loss and pain. I can sense that, and yet I stumble down the other side of the sand dune, heading right for it.

I don't drink. I don't pause. I don't rest. I push onward through the sand, wrapping my head in a scarf as the winds start to pick up and grains of sand begin to buffet my face. Hours pass. At least it feels like hours pass.

I'm panting and exhausted by the time I make it to the first piece of the wreckage. I don't stop to inspect it. What I am searching for will not be found there. Instead I continue on. On and on, with no end in sight.

Finally, I reach the largest piece of debris and I know I've arrived at my destination. I collapse to the ground, exhaustion overwhelming me. I lay there panting, struggling to catch my breath.

"Took you long enough," a voice says. I recognize the voice right away. There's no mistaking it. I'm relieved. I prop myself up onto my elbows, and Jass is sitting there in the sand, his back leaning against the main hold area of a once sleek, phenomenally expensive raptor.

His clothes are simple and black, his hair swept back out of his face, though still wavy and wild, as if it refuses to be tamed. His eyes are even

lighter than they were earlier—a soft, gentle hue of brown and gold, melted together to create a the richest of caramels. He looks tired, though not exhausted and near to passing out, as I'm sure I look.

“I was expecting you a long time ago,” Jass says softly.

“Looks like I keep disappointing you.” I struggle around the words, my throat raw and dry. I don't panic when Jass rises. My fear is there, like a fire raging beneath a blanket, and yet I can't really feel it. I watch him as he approaches and my pulse remains steady. Unaffected. His gait is easy and confident, completely untroubled, and something uncomfortable stirs in my chest. Something...unexpected. It comes back to me slowly—all of the times I've met with him like this before. So many times. He's kissed me. He's held me. He's fucked me, and I've loved every second of it. Gods, am I losing my mind? Am I making this up in my head somehow? No, it's just not possible. The details, all of the conversations we've shared. The amount of times he's pressed his mouth to mine, slid himself inside me, stroked my hair afterwards—I can't have made all of that up. It's real. It's been real for a very long time.

Jass sits down in the sand opposite me, crossing his legs; he removes the water canteen from the small leather bag I've carried here and

he opens it up, holding it out to me. "Drink. If you don't, you'll die."

He's all business, his tone flat. There's a hard edge to his eyes that makes me drink. The water is icy as it flows down my throat, and I practically moan with pleasure. Jass rocks back on his heels, smiling as he watches me. Shame rushes at me, taking me by surprise. I shouldn't be feeling that twist of affection for him in my gut. I shouldn't want him to reach out and hold me. I shouldn't need him, the way I need him right now.

"You must have thought it was hilarious, sitting there across from me in that room, with me not remembering any of this," I mutter.

Jass clasps his hands together, hooking his elbows around his knees to stop himself from toppling backward. "Not particularly. I wanted to touch you. I wanted to kiss you. You'd have had me shot." He looks around, his head angled back as he peers up at the sky, squinting into the light. The suns overhead are growing dimmer as the storm approaches, blotting out more and more of the sky, but they're still bright enough to make the stark white sand almost impossible to look at. "I've decided I don't like this planet," Jass continues. "It's utterly unremarkable. No redeemable features whatsoever."

"The Pirians are good people. They've made the past few cycles bearable for me."

Jass' gaze returns to me, his eyes locking onto my face. He's expressionless. Still. Frozen in place. A burning intensity roils inside him, just below his surface. I can feel it. I know it. I recognize it. The tumultuous emotion inside Jass calls to me, beckoning me to lose myself within it, so it can embrace me too. Hearing that he wanted to touch me, to kiss me when he saw me earlier...just knowing he felt that way is making my head spin. I can't stop staring at him.

"I don't know a lot about the galaxy, Reza," he says. "I only know what the Construct has shown me, and that isn't much. They're very selective about the information they choose to share with their people. But I'm no fool. I know there's more. Their narrow view of life has served its purpose in some ways. I'm strong. I'm resilient. I'm capable, and I'm determined." He angles his head to one side, narrowing his eyes, studying me so fiercely that it feels like my skin is on fire. "Can you say the same?"

I lift my chin in defiance, staring right back at him, refusing to look away. If he thinks he can cow me into submission, he's got another thing coming. "Yes. I can say the same. I'm all of those things and more. I'm an orphan. I have no heritage. No home. I have no wealth, and no power, but it would be a mistake to underestimate me. I fight hard when I'm backed into a corner."

A flicker of amusement passes over his face. I've entertained him. "I'd never make such a grave error," he says, his tone loaded with sarcasm. "But who said anything about fighting?"

My hands tighten around the water canteen I'm still holding onto. "I'm no fool either, Jass. You want my energy."

"If that were true, I would have ended this bullshit as soon as you stepped inside that ready room. I would have taken it and killed every single one of those seers. I could be back onboard The Nexus already, sleeping comfortably in my own bed if that were my purpose for coming here." He splay his fingers wide, showing me his palms. "And yet here we are. Talking like civilized people. Like reunited friends. Like lovers."

"None of this is real. And we aren't any of those things, Jass. You're a murderer. You've killed hundreds of people."

"Thousands," he corrects. "I've killed more people than you can imagine. I don't even remember their faces anymore."

How can he say something like that without a hint of remorse? Not a glimmer of emotion. So many people, all gone, all dead by his hand. How can he not care about that? How can their deaths mean absolutely nothing to him?

Jass smiles an odd, twisted smile that contorts his features. "You're pulling back. Retreating from

me. I can feel your mind slipping away. I'm not a monster, Reza. I'm a pragmatist. I recognize the way of the universe. There will always be those with power and those without it. Those who have none will continually strive for it. And those who have it will accumulate more without even trying. I didn't ask to be more than anyone else. I didn't ask to be poked and prodded in a Construct lab for cycles. I didn't chase down this particular future over any other. I was dealt a hand of cards, and I've been playing them ever since. You would have done the same thing in my shoes."

My reaction is instant and violent. "I would not! The unspeakable things you've done...I would never—"

Jass holds up his right hand, cutting me off. "Never is a long time. Until you've lived a day in my shoes, you really have no idea what you would or wouldn't do." There's a cold, hollow, lonely edge to his words that sends a shiver through me. "And let's not forget," he says, "you were a member of the Construct once upon a time. Can you honestly tell me you never killed anyone? Can you honestly say you didn't follow the orders you were given, because not following them would have meant death to you?"

Gods. My stomach rolls, the sickening weight of buried guilt rearing its ugly head. For a very long time now, I've told myself that I can't be held

accountable for the people who died because of me. I was brain washed. I wasn't myself. I was a part of a well-oiled, vast, huge machine that would have kept turning with or without me. The people who died at the end of my weapon would have died no matter what. Some other Construct soldier would have killed them if I hadn't. And I escaped as soon as I got the chance. I threw down my weapon, and I refused to participate any more. That has to mean something, right?

I tell myself these things but late at night, when I'm fighting to fall asleep, I do remember the faces of the people I've killed. I am plagued by the memory of their fear and terror as they fled before me, and no lie I tell myself will ever make that go away.

I don't like this conversation. We've never talked so seriously before. We've skirted the obvious, ominous roadblocks that stand between us, as if ignoring them will make them disappear altogether.

Jass hums under his breath. By not answering him, I've given him the response he was looking for, confirming his suspicions. Slowly, he reaches out and lifts his hand, taking hold of a piece of my hair. He studies it, and then carefully brushes it behind my ear; his touch is warm, even though he doesn't make contact with my skin, and my heart starts tripping all over the place. "You're terrible

at hiding your emotions. I'd be able to read your thoughts even if I couldn't read your mind. I know the guilt you carry with you. Don't worry," he says softly. "Letting go is the hard part. Once you admit the truth to yourself, everything that follows after is easy."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I whisper. There's a frightened voice inside me that does know what he's talking about, though, and it's urging me to accept his words. It would be so easy. It would make so much sense. To shut down the part of me that insists on feeling so much.

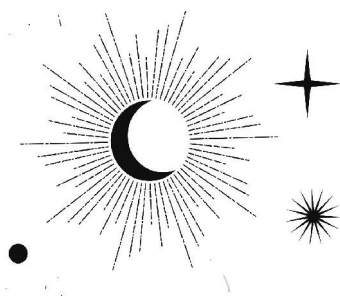
Jass' smile broadens, though I can tell he's irritated by my response. "Time's up, Reza," he tells me. "But don't worry. We'll see each other again soon."

"No. No more. I either need to remember what happens here when we meet, or we don't do it anymore. I swear, I won't be calling you to me anymore. I mean it."

Jass laughs—a deep, dangerous, carnal sound. "Okay. If that's what you want. But I'm not the one hiding these interactions from you, Reza. Have you ever considered that maybe you're the one hiding them from yourself?"

I'm about to answer him, to call him crazy, to fling every cruel word I know at him, but suddenly my breath is sucked away from me. I haven't noticed how quickly the tornado of dirt and sand

has closed in on us. I haven't noticed how somehow we became enclosed in it, and that we were sitting at the very eye of it's swirling, raging mass. The walls of the storm close in, faster than I could have imagined, and I'm ripped from the dune, sand flying and pelting my body like a million shards of glass. For a second I am weightless, and then it feels as if I'm being torn apart, a crushing force pulling me in every direction. Below, Jass stands in the center of the storm, his arms raised, a mad conductor directing his symphony...and then, in the blink of an eye, he's gone.



SIXTEEN

JASS

THE RECKONING HALL

The dream was different this time. Hard to initiate, and then out of control. The storm wasn't even my doing. I tried to hold it back for as long as possible before it consumed us. I sat there, drinking her in, my blood roaring in my ears, desperate to pick her up and take her in my arms, but there was no time. I was forced to let the dream collapse. I'm strong, that's true, but like every single other source of power in the galaxy, I am forced to recognize my limitations. I would have liked to stay longer, but her retreat made it impossible to hold the strands of the dream state together without my own mind buckling under the strain. Now that we're in such close proximity, she's much stronger than she knows. She's stronger than I'll ever admit to her,

and it makes me seriously fucking nervous.

I lie in the dark for an hour or more, listening to the dreams of all the people sleeping close by, marveling at how obliviously they traipse through the experience, barely even participating in the journey their subconscious takes them on. Things could be so different for them, with a tweak here and a tiny edit there. Revenge could be won. Success could be achieved. Anger could be assuaged. Sexual desires could be fulfilled. And yet none of these people are aware that they can take the reins and control their nighttime misadventures, if only they tried a little.

Pathetic, really.

After a while, I sense an irregularity amongst all of the slumbering minds: a sharp point of clarity, burning brightly in amongst all the muted background noise. Someone else is awake. It's not Reza. I know the signature pattern of her mind almost as well as I know my own at this point, and this new, awake mind is nothing like hers. Nothing like hers at all. I throw the sheets back on my cot, trying not to shiver against the cold too violently as I pull my clothes on and shove my feet inside my boots. Once again, I marvel at the sheer madness of these people as I let myself out of my room and I enter the giant maze of tunnel ways that comprise the sub city. The Construct would never allow one of their prisoners access to their ship. They would

be tortured (sometimes by me) and then restrained in the most painful manner possible until they cracked and gave up whatever information they possessed, and then they would be killed (sometimes by me) and summarily ejected out of the nearest air lock.

These seers, with their strange, ridged foreheads, and their strange, black eyes, mustn't have an ounce of common sense between them. What do they honestly think will happen here? Do they think I'll witness their peaceful way of life, living like rosticks, borrowing their way around below the ground, and I'll somehow decide I want to be one of them? I can sense their hope. I felt a tall, shining pillar of it burning through in the heart of that woman, Erika, and it filled me with pity. They don't even know what they're hoping for. They have no idea what's coming. Reza's very existence has blinded them, obscuring the truth of what will happen in the coming future. It took me a moment to figure that one out. Every mind I've entered since I arrived here on Pirius has been shielded by this blank, weird void. I wasn't able to discern how they were all, to a last man, hiding their thoughts from me, until I realized they weren't hiding anything at all. Their hazy visions ceased the moment Reza appeared on their doorstep.

I find my way through the network of tunnels without a problem, honing in on the bright, sharp

consciousness out there in the dark. I allow my own mind to wander. As always, Reza was at ease in the dreamscape. She didn't quail at my presence until we spoke of death. She probably doesn't believe me when I tell her that I want her to remember our nighttime adventures together, but it's the truth. If she remembered, she wouldn't have been afraid of me during our first, real in-person meeting. I normally don't give a shit if people are afraid of me—it's actually very useful on Archimedes if everyone is crapping their pants when I'm around—but it's different with her. I didn't like the hesitation that flooded down our bond. I definitely didn't like the way her adrenalin spiked. I saw her pulse racing at her throat. I saw how wide her pupils dilated. She was the very embodiment of fear, and it stung more than it should have.

Eventually my walk leads me to a dark, dry cavern. I'm momentarily surprised by the immense size of the place. The air is cool and smells vaguely of incense. Just like the old chapel back on The Nexus, this place feels sacred. I can hear the echoes of a thousand ancient prayers being lifted up here, but not prayers constructed of words. These prayers were formed from battle. I can hear the cries of victory vibrating through the air, and feel the burning sting of defeat still ringing off the rough-hewn walls. The floor of the cavern is arranged like that of a gladiator's ring, but there are

no galleries for spectators. The men and women who entered this cavern over the ages did not come to prove themselves to others. They came only to prove their worth to themselves. My head spins as I soak in the atmosphere, until I feel drunk on it. Blinded by it. I close my eyes, allowing myself to feel each and every individual voice that exists here in this silent place.

“They called this the Reckoning Hall,” a voice says, issuing out of the shadows. I’m unsurprised; I knew the man was there, sitting in the dark, waiting for me. “Many cycles ago,” he continues, “when an apprentice first came into their sight, they’d come here to be tested against their master. If the apprentice could outwit their master by foretelling what he or she would do before they did it, they’d earn their robes.”

“Sounds like a game of cat and mouse to me.” I keep my eyes closed. I can see it, though. The masters, clearing their minds, and then the young wards, fierce and resolute, ready to prove their mettle, reaching out, groping for what might come next. “I wonder if any of them were good enough to see themselves failing,” I whisper.

“Many of them were. Many of them didn’t even step foot inside this place for cycles, because every time they tried they saw themselves defeated and humiliated,” the man answers. “Tell me. Can you see what is to come? When you’re on

Archimedes, hidden away on that black, glittering moon, can you divine a person's future from looking into their hearts?"

I huff out a sharp breath down my nose. He shouldn't know about Archimedes. The Construct's research facility isn't exactly advertised. Neither is my position there. "No. I haven't been cursed with that specific burden," I answer.

There's a long pause. A rustling of robes. The man who's been waiting for me steps into vision, a long staff propped gracefully over his shoulder. Unlike the other seers I've encountered so far with their dusty, colorless hair, this guy's head is shaved, revealing a number of ridges that travel all the way up onto his skull. His skin is smooth like a mask, making it difficult to tell how old he is. There's something age-worn about him, but at the same time something equally sharp and youthful.

"I'm Darius," he says, spinning his staff around. The length of wood could be a walking aid, but that isn't the case. The way he handles the weapon with ease and expertise speaks of many long cycles of training. "I thought I might run into you tonight," Darius says. He doesn't stop walking until he's standing before me, and there's barely more than a few feet of space between us.

The man blinks at me, as if trying to free his eyes of grit, the ridges in his forehead deepening as he concentrates. After a long time, he says, "You're

sick.”

“I thought you people couldn’t read me.”

Darius shrugs, smiling broadly as he looks down at his feet. “We can’t. *I* can’t. But I can still use my eyes to see what is standing right in front of me. I’m a healer. I take note of these things. You’re sweating. Your hands are shaking, Jass. The pulse at your throat is throbbing out of control. So, yes, you’re sick. Even a blind man could see that.”

I look down, and he’s right. My hands are trembling. My mind has been so filled with thoughts of Reza that it’s been relatively easy to put aside my body’s increasing need for Light. I won’t be able to ignore it soon, though. My addiction will come calling, and I’ll have to pay heed to it. I close my hands into fists at my sides. “I’m fine,” I answer. “It’s hot down here. There’s nothing else to it.”

Darius smirks—he clearly doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. He points the end of his staff at me, circling me, a puzzled look on his face. “Would you consider yourself a man of honor, Jass?” he asks.

“The Construct doesn’t care for honor. Only obedience.”

“But what about *you*? Do you consider yourself a man of your word?”

I hesitate. I’ve never had to consider such a thing. He wants to know if I keep my promises. The

thing is, before agreeing to Reza's terms, I can't remember ever having made one. "I suppose so," I say. "Whatever that's worth."

Darius makes a low clicking sound at the back of his throat. "It's worth a lot down here. Your word, your honor, is your only currency. Cultivate an excellent reputation and you'll be a wealthy, influential man. Earn yourself a bad name, the name of a liar and a cheat, and you'll become the poorest of the poor."

"I don't need currency down here, stranger. I can take whatever I want."

Again, Darius shrugs. "In most instances, that might be the case. But there are some things that can't be taken."

"Such as?"

"Friendship. Compassion. Understanding. Kindness. *Love*. None of these things can be taken from another person without their consent. They have to be offered freely. You can certainly take things that *look* like those traits, but they're false. Based in fear. Worthless pandering from those who would run from you the moment they got the chance."

I fight off the urge to laugh. This seer must be crazy. Absolutely insane. "I don't need friendship. I don't need kindness. I sure as hell don't need love."

"Even the blackest, most corrupt soul desires love," Darius counters. "He just refuses to believe

it, for fear that accepting it will weaken him. And it *would*, because love makes bad people do good things all the time.”

“You’re rambling.” I imagine grabbing that staff from him and wrapping it around his head. It would make a pretty satisfying splintering sound as the thing cracked in two over the top of his skull. As if he senses what I’m thinking, Darius laughs, tossing the staff at me so I have to snatch it out of the air. The wood is unbelievably smooth, worn by cycles of handling and spinning. It’s perfectly weighted—a thing of beauty, really, though undeniably simple. It wouldn’t stand a chance against a Construct issue phase rifle, but I admire the feel of it in my hand all the same. Now, Darius the seer is completely unarmed against me. He has been all along; my mind is faster than his staff could ever be. I could tear his body in two by simply imagining it, and then it would be all over for him. Most men in Darius’ position like to cling to their rifles and their pitchforks, and whatever else they have at hand, because it makes them feel like they have a fighting chance of defending themselves, even though they know it isn’t true. Darius appears to be much smarter than the average, terrified farmer I usually meet on my travels, however. I can’t decide whether this information makes me respect him, or dislike him. What an unusual position; I can’t recall the last

time I've analyzed how I feel about a stranger. For the longest time there has just been me, and then everyone else. One man versus a galaxy full of plotting, conniving, treacherous, self-serving bastards. And in point of fact, I have been the biggest plotting, conniving, self-serving bastard out of the lot of them.

I plant the end of the staff down into the dirt at my feet, and I use the polished length of wood to lean my weight against. It's an odd stance. My back is so used to remaining ramrod straight at all times that it actually takes effort to relax against the staff. I make my movement look as natural as I can, but there's a reason why I'm leaning. I *am* unwell. I am growing sicker and sicker by the hour, and with no hope of obtaining any Light, I'm only going to get sicker. With withdrawal sickness comes anger and unpredictability. These people aren't going to know what hit them when I really start crashing. Perhaps I should warn them. Tell them all to go. To hand over the girl already, and allow me to leave with her so they can preserve their wretched way of life. A very large part of me doesn't want to do that, though. Why should I, when they've lead me on such a merry chase the past few days? They've hidden the truth from me, made me comply to their wishes, and then refused to give me what I have demanded of them. They deserve everything they have coming to them.

They've also fed you. Clothed you. Given you your freedom here amongst them. They've trusted you in their home, when everything told them they shouldn't.

I don't like the quiet, calm voice that speaks these words in the back of my head. I recognize the voice as my own, but I haven't heard it in so long that it's as if an unwelcome family member has shown up on my doorstep, wanting to give me advice after having abandoned me for cycles to fend for myself. I shove the voice down, shaking it off. My head swims, and I feel the sweat forming on my brow. I'm so queasy that it feels like the contents of my stomach are boiling. I could lean over and throw up into the dirt right now, but how would that look? Darius would tell everyone what he saw, and people would know how vulnerable I am. I clench my jaw until it feels like my teeth are going to crack, and eventually the nausea passes enough for me to take a deep breath and stand straight again.

"The reason why I ask if you're a man of your word, Jass, is because I'd like to strike a deal. A deal that might be of interest to you in your current...*position*."

"I'm in no *position*," I snap back. "And I don't need to make bargains with any of you people. I'm biding my time here. The moment I tire of this charade, I'll take Reza and be done with all of

this.”

Darius smiles in a knowing, awfully condescending manner. “And why haven’t you tired of this charade already, Jass? Why *haven’t* you destroyed the sub city and taken what you came here for?”

I open my mouth to reply, but there are no words on the tip of my tongue. I never find myself speechless, but right now I can’t think of a single thing to say to the man in the dusty robes standing opposite me. I *should* have killed everyone by now. I should have ended this folly before it even began, and yet...I haven’t. Even *I* can see how out of character that is for me. But when I think about laying this place to waste, lighting the entire underground city on fire and letting madness and anarchy take hold while I kidnap Reza and fly away...there’s something stopping me from taking action. Something holding me back.

“I don’t have to answer your riddles.” I affect boredom, but I know Darius sees right through the act. Infuriating. “You know, back on The Nexus, no one would dare look at me the way you’re looking at me right now,” I say. “It’d be more than their lives were worth.”

“That’s an odd statement.” Darius wags his finger at me, frowning. “Should I assume my life’s worth so little? That my existence is worth so much less than a few moments of open eye contact with a

stranger. A stranger with a fierce reputation, of course, but still...just a man, all the same. What kind of groveling creature would I be if I couldn't look you up and down and measure your worth, just as you've measured mine? I'd be a creature of the lowest order, and I assure you that isn't the case. You'll discover that in time, though."

I'm taken aback by the way he speaks to me, like he's chiding a child. Do I really look so sick? So weak? I must look like I'm hovering at death's door if he thinks he can get away with condescending to me. I toss the staff at Darius' feet, glowering up at him from beneath my banked brows. "Just say what you want to say. I'm tired of standing around, bickering with a man who makes no sense."

Again, the other man smiles. He is full of smiles. It seems to be his natural response to any sign of confrontation—a politician's defense. "I don't know what substance you require to calm the need tearing through your veins right now, Jass, but I know you're burning inside. There's no smoke without fire, after all. And considering the smoke pouring off you, the fire must be considerable. I can help you. I'm an expert healer. There isn't a compound in this galaxy I can't cure you of. It'll take a number of days, and you'll have to be compliant, but it can be done. You'll be free of the yoke hanging around your neck. And all I ask in

return...”

I stand there waiting for him to continue with my eyes closed. His words have jarred me. Thrown me. Made me shut down. I don't want his help. Don't need it. I can handle this on my own. I don't need him sticking his ridged nose in where it's not wanted. And to tell me that his help demands my compliance? I should rip his head off his shoulders right where he stands. I'm vibrating, jittering out of control. The power that resides inside me is like a coiled cobra, rearing back, ready to strike.

“Perhaps you're not ready to have this conversation after all,” Darius says softly. There's a whisper of heavy material and a slight grunting sound, and when I open my eyes, he has collected his staff from the floor and has propped it over his shoulder again. “When you'd like to learn the terms of the bargain I'm prepared to strike with you, you can come back and find me here whenever you like.” Then he does something unexpected; he reaches out and he places his hand on my shoulder. He's a foot taller than me, which isn't a factor I usually allow to bother me, but Darius' looming stature suddenly makes me feel out of sorts.

“I'm sure I'll see you soon,” he tells me. “In the meantime, perhaps you could consider the question I posed to you a moment ago. And perhaps you should get some proper sleep. Weaving such intricate landscapes in your dreams can't

provide much valuable rest.”

I jerk back, away from his touch. Darius seems to waiver a little, and then...

Huh...

The Reckoning Hall is melting. My mouth feels like it's filling up with water. My knees give out from beneath me; I throw a hand out, trying to grapple hold of Darius' staff again, but my fingers grasp at thin air. Suddenly, everything is darkness. The cavern is gone. Darius is gone. I'm alone in the blackness, and I can't move...

I jolt awake with a start, my heart hammering like a piston inside my ribcage. Sitting bolt upright, I claw at my throat, trying to free myself of the ligature that's pulling tight around it. Only, there's no ligature. There's nothing at all. I'm in my cot, in my small, drafty room, and I'm alone.

“*Hells...*” I wipe the sweat from my brow with the already soaked sheet that covers me. I thought... I believed I'd climbed out of my bed and gone to Darius. I believed I'd been awake. The bastard did exactly to me what I do to Reza, and I didn't even realize. How could he be that strong? How could he sneak past my defenses without me even suspecting? It makes no sense. The anger that rises up and storms inside me is unparalleled. I sag back onto the thin mattress and I allow myself the pleasure of picturing Darius' death, over and over again, playing on an endless loop. I behead him. I

eviscerate him. I plunge a blade deep into his chest. I shove him out of a shuttle, three thousand feet up. I watch him freeze in the emptiness of space, his blood pouring out of his ears, his nose and his mouth. I watch him disintegrate as a phase rifle hits him square in the face. And then...

I picture him healing me.

That's what he offered me. He offered to take away my addiction to the Light altogether. To heal me of my need for it. A solution to the problem, instead of a temporary bandage to conceal it. Is that what I want? The Light's been a leash around my neck for as long as I can recall. Regis has used it to control me for so long that there are stretches of time—weeks, months, cycles even—when the situation doesn't even strike me as fucked up anymore. It's just been *normal*.

Without the Light, I would no longer be vulnerable, dependent, or weak. Even now, Regis is probably counting down the hours and until I come crawling back to The Nexus with my tail between my legs, begging and pleading for one more measly dose. Can I swallow my pride and return to Darius after he duped me, though? And will I be able to comply with the terms of his bargain? Who knows what he'll want in return for his help?

I shake violently as I close my eyes. The room's still cold, I know it is, but my skin's on fire, scalding to the touch and drenched in sweat. When

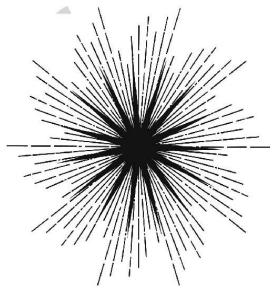
I wake up in the morning, I'm going to want to die. I'm going to pray for death, if only for the simple fact that I won't be in so much pain any more.

"In the meantime, Jass, perhaps you could consider the question I posed to you a moment ago." Darius' voice replays inside my head like an echo as I allow the darkness to swallow me whole again.

However, my last thought before I drift into unconsciousness, is a different question he posed to me. He asked why I haven't tired of this charade. I told myself that I didn't know the answer to that question, but that was a lie. I could easily take Reza before she has time to bite down on that capsule of poison. I could lock her out of her own body, make sure she can't move a muscle, an inch, can't even blink her damned eyes. All of that is within my power.

I know all too well why I haven't done it.

I haven't done it, because Reza wouldn't like it.



SEVENTEEN

REZA

THE TRUTH CAN BE UNPLEASANT

I wake to the sound of bells and the sensation of a thousand ton weight pressing down on my chest. It takes me a second to remember how to breathe, and then another second to remember where I am.

The moment I think Jass' name, the dream comes flooding back to me. And then...many more dreams. Many, *many* more.

What...

...the...

...Fuck?

Oh...*gods*.

I've been to him before. I've moved the heavens aside in order to get to him. For...oh no. It's been this way *for cycles*. Ever since the Invictus. A wall of horror slams into me when I remember our past exchanges. At first, I resisted

him. I did everything I could to avoid the connection I could feel growing stronger and stronger every time we met. And then, my emotions became too much. I gave myself to him. I kissed him in a windswept field he'd created with his mind, and afterward he'd held me and stroked my hair while I cried. He brought me to a beach, and we fought. He held me. He kissed me. We tore each other's clothes off, and he claimed me for the very first time. He took me to planets I've never been to before. When I entered a dream and I couldn't remember the past we shared, he showed me his memories of us time and time again.

As each dream comes jolting back to me, I want to die. I hate myself for what I've allowed to take place. I want to hate Jass, too, for manipulating me and using me. But there's a problem: he didn't do either of those things. I know with an absolute certainty that he didn't take advantage of me. Every time he's reached out for me, he's offered me an out. He's offered me the option of backing away and leaving him. I've never once felt threatened or truly afraid of him in my dreams. I've felt an odd kinship, rooted deep inside me, and it's overwritten any other emotion I might have had. When his lips have met mine, I've welcomed the taste of him. When he's pushed himself inside me, his breath hot and heavy in my ear, I've felt complete. And when his arms have

encircled me, I've felt...*safe*.

Gods. This is so fucked up.

I hid all of this from myself. I purposefully buried it, so I wouldn't have to deal with it. It was the weakest thing I could have done. I can still feel the draw down the tether we share now, tugging at me, trying to pull me toward him. Jass told me he wasn't responsible for the fact that I couldn't remember our meetings, and, against all the odds, I believe him. So many miles separated us before, when he was on The Nexus, and the connection linking us together was weak. I could still feel it niggling at me, teasing me, taunting me, beckoning me out into space, but it was easy to press it to the back of my mind, and easy enough to ignore it. Now, with him only a few hundred feet away, that same connection feels capable of lifting me from my feet and hauling me to his side whether I like it or not. It's strong and bright, burning a pathway through the synapses of my mind. Jass was right. Somehow, I did subconsciously manage to block out my own memories, either from shame or the simple fact that I did *not* want to deal with them, but now that the connection's reinforcing itself so quickly, it won't allow me the luxury of ignorance any more.

The sound of running boots and strained voices flood the hallway outside my room as a handful of people hurry by. The clamor of bells continues as I

hurry to pull on my clothes and I leave my room. The urgency and panic that fills the air finally hits me when I step into the tunnel that leads to the communications center where I first met Erika. A hundred bodies are packed tightly together, where the sides of the tunnel form a bottleneck, and a wailing woman with a child in her arms collapses to the ground, disappearing beneath the crush.

“Wait! Wait!” I struggle to push closer but more and more people are filling the tunnel, all desperately trying to jam their way forward through the bottleneck. “Stop!” I scream. “Someone fell! Someone went down!”

A tall man beside me grabs hold of my arm, trying to jerk me back. “Wait your turn. We’ll all get through if you just wait!” When he looks at me, his eyes glaze over and he releases me, though, shaking his hand out. His mouth hangs open, slack, and he falls still. A wave of people flow around him, and he’s lost in the crowd. I scoot down, trying to locate the woman and her child who fell, but whenever I bend, hands and legs and arms collide with me, threatening to shove me down. I reach the spot where the woman vanished, and I search the ground as best I can without falling myself, but there’s no one there, no one being crushed underfoot. She could have scrambled her way to safety? She must have gotten to her feet and already moved on. Someone else must have helped

her up.

I scan the faces that surround me, hunting for the woman's panicked features, but I don't see her. Only a hundred urgent, frantic people, all desperate to reach their destination. I grab hold of the closest man, shouting into his ear. "What's happened? Are we being attacked?" My head is full of images—unpleasant ones. Construct ships filling the air. Foot soldiers deploying on the surface of Pirius, using their hand scanners to detect the massive sub city beneath their feet. Gods, if that's happened...there are too many people down here. There aren't enough exits. I've witnessed how the Construct handles situations like this before. One canister of stem-gas tossed inside each entryway. That's all it takes. They allow the tunnels to do their job for them, using the natural ventilation that flows through subterranean cities like this to distribute their poison. How long would it take for everyone to be dead? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? A carpet of bodies, eyes rolling, bodies twitching, all laid on top of one another as they slip from this life. I try to breathe cautiously—is there anything wrong with the air?—but all I can smell is sweat and fear.

The man I've grabbed hold of, a boy really, barely out of his apprenticeship, squints at me, attempting to wrestle himself free. "The chancellor..." he gasps. "We have to get to the Appointments Hall. Let me go, damn it. You're

hurting me.”

My grip is loose. There’s no way I’m hurting him with my hand. He’s referring to *me*; my presence is causing him discomfort. I’m never going to get used to the fact that I can cause such harm by merely being. It’s bewildering. I release him, letting him slip away from me, and he disappears, thrusting his way through the crowd with no thought for the people around him.

It takes an age to get through the bottleneck. It’s much easier to move once I’ve battled my way through the melee; the tunnel opens up into a broader walkway, and traffic flows much quicker. I follow the swarm of sweat-covered bodies, and soon I find myself being spat out inside what must be the Appointments Hall. Overhead, the roof of the enormous space is so dimly lit that just a suggestion of its vaulted coves are visible in the darkness. The air’s thick and warm. Cloying. Every available inch of space is occupied by groups of gathered friends and families sticking together. Neighbors, all whispering behind their hands, their dark eyes hazy and clouded as they converse. At the front of the Appointments Hall, a huge, raised dais sits above the uneven, rocky ground that stretches before me. On the dais, an explosion of color takes me by surprise.

Flowers.

So many flowers. Thousands of them.

My breath catches in my throat, my eyes unable to process the scene for a second. There are no flowers on Pirius. As far as I've seen, the only agricultural ground that remains left on the surface, fiercely protected from the planet's storms, is used solely to grow crops. The seers could never give over fertile ground to something so frivolous as flowers. So where, then, have they come from? In a planet so stripped of color, the bright purples, reds, oranges, pinks and yellows are such a surprise to me that for a second I can't see through my tears. They're so beautiful. So unexpected and lovely. It's as if everyone catches sight of the blooms at the same time, because a hushed, reverent silence slowly falls over the assembly, and all faces turn toward the dais. Just to left of the rusting platform, I notice Darius, standing with Chancellor Gain. Col's there, too. It's as if he feels my eyes on him; he looks up, scanning the crowd of people in the half-light until he finds me, standing at the back. His face is bloodless, paler than it was when he first arrived with Jass.

He raises a hand and gestures to me, signaling that I should come forward, but it's impossible. The floor of the Appointments Hall is packed shoulder to shoulder. I only seem to cause people pain when I come into contact with them, and having to touch so many in order to get to Col? That would be unwelcome, but more importantly unkind. Col's

gaze hardens; at first I think he's angry that I'm not doing as he's told me, but then I feel the presence at my back and I know Col's hard stare isn't for me. It's for Jass.

A whisper skates across my skin. A caress of words. "What do you sense inside this room?" Jass is standing so close to me that his lips move my hair as he speaks. His warm breath makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. My eyes slowly close, and for a second, one brief, unexpected second, the weariness that's been weighting my limbs down since I woke eases. A blankness fills my head. A blissful void dampens the relentless chatter around us and for a moment I am calm. My muscles fall slack, and the anxiety that's taken residence deep within my bones loosens its hold over me. I'm transported back through a multitude of dreams where Jass has taken care of me. Peppered my face with kisses. He's soothed my soul, only to then set it on fire all over again. How could I not have remembered all of this? How could I have blotted out so much?

"*I can't sense a thing,*" Jass whispers. "Not that I'm trying. It's kinda fun to revel in this kind of mayhem, don't you think?"

I'm far from reveling in it. Weirdly, it's as though I've been set free from it and he knows this. He isn't touching me, but he's protecting me somehow, shielding me from the noise and the

uplifted voices that continue to war for attention around us. My lungs expand inside my chest, and I can breathe. Feels amazing.

“How are you doing this?” I whisper. He’s here with me, inside this little bubble of quiet he’s created, so I know he can hear me. He sighs; there’s a sort of energy escaping from him, prickling at my skin.

“It’s the easiest thing in the world,” he muses. “I just have to think it and it happens. You could do it, too, but you already know that. You already know how similar we are, don’t you?”

“I know *everything*,” I whisper. “I know how long we’ve been...” Damn it, I can’t say the words. It’s far too difficult. I can’t admit that I’ve craved him without even realizing it. I can’t admit that I... that I *care* about him. These dreams we’ve shared...I don’t even know if they count as real. Our minds were there, but our bodies weren’t. I’d like to be able to say that none of it actually happened because of that fact, but how? I felt his hands on my body. I pressed my own mouth against his. I heard his heart beating wildly beneath the solid muscle of his chest. And my mind *did* fall apart as he made me come. I’d be lying to myself if I tried to convince myself it wasn’t true, and I’ve apparently been lying to myself enough of late.

Jass is quiet for a moment. He doesn’t say anything, but I can feel him thinking. A solid

minute passes before he speaks. “*Everything*. You remember the times we’ve spent together, then.” Not a question. A statement. He shifts, and his chest brushes against my back for a second. My body feels like it’s about to burst into flames. “I was beginning to think we were going to have to start over, Reza. I didn’t want to have to do that.”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I hiss. “None of it. Just because we share a connection doesn’t mean we have to be together. Just because we’ve been together in our heads doesn’t mean we have to be together in reality.” Wouldn’t that just simply everything? It would be wonderful to just discount everything that’s occurred and bury it all beneath the sand dunes. I’m never going to tell Col. I’m never going to tell Darius. I’m never going to tell anyone about the new found history I share with Jass. They’d never understand.

Jass hums deeply. “If you think walking away is so easy, then I admire you. You’re a hell of a lot stronger than me. I know *I* can’t do it.”

A tremor runs down the length of my body, sharp pins and needles settling in my hands and my feet. He’s undeniably a cold, hard, uncaring person most of the time. To hear him say he couldn’t walk away this—from me—causes a strange reaction in me. An admission like that is a weakness on his part. I don’t know how to process his show of vulnerability.

Jass' control over the bubble he's created around us contracts, and the din inside the Appointments Hall comes crashing down again, almost deafening me. Now, when I speak, I have to shout to be heard. "Ease has nothing to do with this," I tell him. "I'm nothing like you, Jass. The only thing you and I have in common is that the Construct took us both. Beyond that, the similarities end. You have no moral compass. You have no conscience." I shake my head, exasperated. Spinning around to face him, my resolve falters as I look up into his gold-flecked eyes. "We're incompatible," I say.

Jass' eyes narrow, crinkling in the corners. Not with annoyance, though. With amusement. He towers over me, his presence sending out even more crackling energy that zips from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. He's pure electricity, and I'm a lightning rod. Dizziness sweeps over me. I have to swallow hard, pulling in a lungful of air in order to try and stop my head from spinning. A fine line forms between Jass' almost black eyebrows—a look I wouldn't expect to see him wearing. Concern? No. No, it couldn't be that.

"Incompatible's a poor choice of words," he says. "No one else in the entire universe is compatible with me. You're the only one. And you could look for the rest of your life, Reza, and you'll

never find anyone who fits you as completely as I do.”

I don’t want it to be true. If I shut out his words and refuse to let them in, perhaps I’ll be able to quash the knowledge that he’s right. Why is it so fucking hard? “Impossible, then,” I counter. “If anyone here knew who you really were, the place would be deserted. We can never be us. You’d always have to be someone else, you’d have to change, and we both know you’re not capable of that.”

A flash of anger briefly twists his features, and a troubling thought hits me as Jass blinks down at me. There’s a savage, untamable, raw beauty to him. He isn’t classically handsome by any stretch of the imagination, but the knife straight, strong line of his nose lends his features solidity; the high, pronounced line of his cheekbones tempers that, offering a softness in return. His full mouth is expressive, the cupid’s bow that forms his upper lip perfect in its line. And his eyes, so mercurial and volatile, calm one moment, wild and extreme in their beauty the next, are more than a little distracting. He’s fascinating to look at whatever his mood, but, worryingly, he is at his most breathtaking when he’s angry.

“People of Pirius, we’re grateful you have been able to join us here today. We are aware that this event wasn’t supposed to happen for another

six days, however, as you know, the timeline of the west sector developed rather dramatically last night.” Darius stands on the dais, a mournful look on his face. His robes, which are usually white, are black today, shot through with a single line of red down the right hand side. He wears a mask of worry that looks as if it’s been permanently carved into his face—a mask very similar to the one Col is wearing as he clambers up onto the platform next to Darius.

“This isn’t even faintly interesting,” Jass hisses into my ear.

“Shut up.”

Surprisingly, Jass shuts up, but I can feel a wall of heat radiating from him, burning into my back. He’s not used to being told to shut up. I can’t worry about the repercussions of my sharp tongue right now, though. This tangled mess between us is going to have to wait. All of it will. Darius is saying something, and it sounds important. The woman next to me is crying, tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

“...natural death. However, the cardiac failure Erika and many of her close friends foresaw in her future a long time ago did not come to pass. At some point last night, someone broke into Erika’s rooms and stabbed her in the stomach with a ceremonial blade. She didn’t seek help. She used the minutes she had left to write a letter to her son,

followed by a letter to you, her people. Col will open and read that letter to you now, as per Erika's wishes."

Muted muttering spreads through the crowd like wildfire, rising to an impossibly loud buzz. I can't bend my head around the statement that just came out of Darius' mouth. *Erika is dead?* Erika... can't be dead. And what the hell is the healer talking about? Erika foresaw her own death? She thought she was going to have a heart attack in six days' time? It dawns on me as I try and snap the stubborn puzzle pieces together, that this is what Erika was talking about the night I came to the sub city. She said she was sick, that her condition was worsening, but she looked fine. Darius mentioned a gathering, and the chancellor has been sad. She was filled with regret that she wouldn't be able to attend the ceremony in person. She was talking about her own funeral procession. Gods, what a terrible thing to know about yourself. And then to be wrong? To have even less time than you anticipated...

"Why has this happened?" someone at the far back yells. "The date of Erika's death was predicted fifteen cycles ago! Many of us saw it. Why would it happen now?"

"There's been no murder amongst our people for centuries," another shouts.

Darius and Col ignore the succession of furious questions that are volleyed at them from around the

Appointments Hall. Awkwardly, Col stands in the center of the dais and carefully tears open the small white scroll of people he's holding in his hands. His hands shake as he unravels the paper. His voice cracks when he begins to speak.

“Friends. I have anticipated the arrival of this day for half a lifetime. I’ve had a long time to consider the words I will leave behind to guide you, and yet now, at the hour of my death, they seem insufficient. For the past forty-three cycles, it has been my greatest honor to serve my people. No other path could have led me to such joy, satisfaction and happiness. I dearly hope I have lived up to your expectations as a good leader, and that I have always steered you in the right direction. Occasionally, our pathways are obscured, and the future is uncertain. As for all species and peoples across the galaxy, moments like these are frightening. Uncertainty is always frightening. When we can no longer see the road ahead...” Col pauses, blinking, batting his tears away with the back of his hand. He clears his throat and then continues. “When we can no longer see the road ahead, we are paralyzed by fear and indecision. Which is the right choice? How should we proceed? Should we stand and fight, or hide ourselves away, to fight another day? I say to you, friends, that we are a good people. A righteous people. The coming days might be dark and fraught with tough

decisions, but we are still a mighty force to contend with, even without our visions. There is *always* a clear line between right and wrong. We will *always* know which side of that line we stand upon, because we do not allow the weak and the voiceless to suffer. We do not pass by those in pain on the wayside without offering our assistance. The doors of our houses are always open to those in need, and our hands are always outstretched to offer help. It is who we are. It is who we must remain. Always. No matter the cost. Remember this, people of Pirius. My fondest farewell, Erika Pakka.”

You could cut through the silence hovering over the hall with a knife. You can almost feel the texture of it in the air, like greasy smoke. For a long time, no one says anything. We all watch as Col sheds his grief, his tears streaming down his face, his shoulders shaking as he weeps. Beside him, Darius places a hand on his back, between his shoulder blades, and he closes his eyes, bowing his head.

Slowly, Chancellor Gain places his hand in the middle of Darius’ back, bowing his head and closing his eyes. A pattern forms, the woman standing behind Gain copying him. Considerably shorter than the chancellor, she has to reach up to place her on his back, but she bows her head and closes her eyes all the time. The person behind her

follows suit, and then the person behind him, and then the person behind him. It doesn't take long for the movement to flow down into the people surrounding the dais, and in a chain of sorrow suddenly everyone is connected. The men and women pressed in around us all mimic the gesture in silence, and soon Jass and I are the only ones untouched, standing with our heads held high.

On the dais, Col's pale blue eyes find mine. He wipes his face with the back of his hand, his shoulders hitching as he obviously takes in a huge breath. A long time passes. No one breathes a word. No one twitches. No one moves. Not even Jass. I risk a glance at him out of the corner of my eye and his face is grave, his expression void of the disgust I would have expected from him in a situation like this. He looks like he's taking everything in, absorbing it, cataloguing the sounds and sights within the great Appointments Hall. It's so strange to have him standing next to me. *So* strange. It's hard to accept that he's even really here, apart from the Construct, and just...*standing* there next to me. My senses scream that I should put as much space between the two of us as possible. My sense of self-preservation would have me on the outer reaches of the galaxy if it were at all possible. On the other hand, my sense of curiosity would have be standing right here, waiting to see what happens next. My need and my deep, frightening affection for him

demands that he remain by my side.

He's been a facsimile for so long. A ghost. A dreamed up man in a dreamed up field, or a dreamed up city, or dreamed up darkness. Now that he's here, his hand less than four inches away from mine, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. How I'm supposed to react.

As if he can feel my gaze on him, Jass looks askance, mirroring my own covert move as he watches me out of the corner of his eye. "You think very loudly," he murmurs.

"My shields are up. You can't tell what I'm thinking," I whisper back.

Without any warning, the thousands of people in the crowd suddenly all lift their heads in unison, releasing their hold on their neighbor's back, and a loud buzzing fills the hall as everyone begins to chatter and argue all over again. Their moment of grief is over. I jump at the unexpected activity after such a somber silence, and a ruinous smile spreads across Jass' face.

"Your shield's pretty good," he informs me. "But it's like you're carrying water in a bucket filled with holes. You conceal most of your mind, but your thoughts and ideas still leak out all over the place. I can't be held accountable if I trip over a few of them here and there."

I scowl, looking away from him. How dare he talk about accountability. Jass Beylar doesn't

consider himself accountable for anything, least of all his own actions. I know that perfectly well. I'm about to try and slip off into the crowd, to make my way closer to the dais, but Darius steps forward and raises his hand, urging the Pirians to calm themselves.

It's not until peace has returned that he speaks softly, his soothing voice carrying to every corner of the Appointments Hall. "Since Chancellor Pakka departed us earlier than expected, we've not had time to accept nominations for her successor. There are rules that must be followed, however—"

"Chancellor Farren!" someone shouts close to the dais.

"Yes! Farren!" follows another voice.

Darius smiles tightly. "As you know, a chancellor may not preside over more than one sector. That means that Chancellor Farren is unfortunately ineligible to take over Chancellor Pakka's responsibilities."

A number of voices are raised, calling out their dismay, arguing the point with Darius. My friend on the dais simply shakes his head, dismissing them out of hand. "As healer of the first sector, I am not eligible for the position, and neither is Chancellor Gain. The new Chancellor of the first sector must not already hold a position of power. That's our way. It has always been our way. We will not turn away from our traditions and our politics now,

when we should be adhering to them all the more rigorously.”

Darius’ words are not well received by some of the crowd, but there are others who agree with him. A woman with pronounced brow ridges and almost completely black eyes spits on the ground at her feet. “Farren’s a crook. A thug, who throws punches to solve his problems. He’d only lead us to destruction and war,” she hisses.

“War’s already coming. War is already on our doorstep,” a short man with a bulbous nose and tattoos marking his cheeks replies. “We’ve never had a leader with military experience before, because we’ve never needed one. Things are different now. We need someone who knows how to protect us.”

An argument breaks out, and voices climb higher and higher, inflated with anger, frustration and fear, so loud that Darius’ desperate cries for peace nearly go unheard. “Friends! Friends! We will proceed with the nominations as we always have. As you leave the hall, you will be able to write your nomination for chancellor upon a token and cast it anonymously into the ballot box.”

Darius pauses, his eyes roving over the hall, his mouth parted, as if he’s about to say something else. He closes his mouth, frowning, and then a look of determination takes over. “I’m aware that it’s unusual to share your nomination, but in this

instance I feel compelled to do so. When I cast my token into the ballot box tonight, I already know the name that will be written upon it. That name will be..." Everyone holds their breath, waiting for what Darius will say. The man stands a little straighter, takes a deep breath, and completes his sentence. "*Col Pakka.*"

Pandemonium.

Instant madness echoes from the dirt beneath my feet, up, up, up, vibrating off the high, vaulted ceilings of the hall. The name is a surprise to all. A shock that no one knows how to process. Even I'm a little taken aback by Darius' decision.

"*Col can't be the next chancellor!*" someone hollers.

"*He is not one of us!*"

"*He is not Pirian!*"

Some members of the crowd look to one another, confusion written all over them as they clearly consider the validity of this strange announcement. Col himself looks stunned, still clutching hold of the scroll of paper his mother asked him to read out loud. He looks at Darius, his mouth hanging open, like he can't comprehend Darius' announcement. Darius is steadfast in his conviction, though.

"Col is a man of great courage. He's repeatedly shown great love and affection for the people of this planet. He has sacrificed and suffered for a

people he shares no blood with, when he did not have to. He's shown greater dedication and commitment to the continued safety of our people than anyone else I know. Before you reject Col as a candidate for this position, ask yourself this. What have *you* given to ensure the safety of your neighbors?" Darius pauses for a moment, waiting for his question to settle in the minds of his people. His voice is steeled by conviction when he continues. "Erika Pakka was a revered, much loved leader of our people. She was honorable, benevolent, honest and kind. She will be greatly missed, and it will be almost impossible to find someone to fill her shoes. But who better than her son? A man formed and molded by Erika's own hand, since he was less than three cycles of age? A man within whom she has instilled a fierce love for this planet and its people? Col's faith in our way of life is unshakeable, just as his mother's was. I can't think of anyone more qualified and suited to take her place."

"He isn't blessed with sight!" an elderly woman wearing a black robe calls. "How would *he* guide us?"

Darius splays his fingers, holding his hands out, palms upward. "None of us are blessed with the sight at this moment, grandmother. Who knows if our talents will return? We've relied on our visions to guide us for so long that without them we are

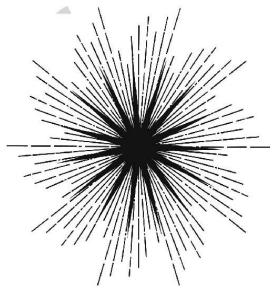
trapped by our own indecision, just as Erika said in her letter. Col has always had to rely on his intuition, his gut and his own common sense to make his way through life. He is in a far better position to lead than anyone else because of that alone.”

A rumble of disquiet spreads through the gathering. Jass laughs softly under his breath, shaking his head, dark waves of hair tumbling into his face as he looks at his feet. “So pointless,” he says softly. “All of this bickering and sniping. If the Construct finds this dusty, bleak outpost, it doesn’t matter who’s leading the first sector, or any of the other sectors for that matter. It doesn’t matter who can see what coming, or who is a completely fucking blind. There won’t be a single thing they can do about it. They’ll be wiped from the annals of time. Their civilization will scattered like grains of sand. Or rather they’ll be buried *beneath* the sand. Regis won’t even have to break a sweat to make it happen.” Jass sees my face and stops laughing. “You look like you want to tear my head off. You think I’m being unkind. I’m not, though. Your anger’s misplaced.”

“My anger is definitely *not* misplaced. It’s perfectly warranted. You’re an unfeeling asshole with no conscience.”

Jass shrugs. “Took me a long time to learn that people don’t like hearing the truth. The truth can be

unpleasant. I'm sorry that the reality of this situation is so difficult for you to stomach, Reza. I'm sorry for *that* at least. If these people really are about to attract the attention of the Construct, then there's absolutely no hope for them. You know that." He looks around, a faint air of disinterest pouring off him now. His gaze lands on Col, and a gentle line forms between his dark eyebrows. His face has paled significantly in the last few moments. "You'd better go hold that poor bastard's hand," Jass says. "He looks like he's about to cry again." With that, he pivots on the heel of his boot and he walks away.



EIGHTEEN

REZA

BLOOD SUN

I'm aware that people like to place bets on things. The Construct doesn't allow social fraternizing amongst its members, however we've raided numerous drinking halls and brothels throughout the galaxy, and there are always creatures of varying races and species gathered around tables, chancing the contents of their pockets on random, seemingly unimportant games of luck.

I've never placed a bet in my life—I've never seen the point in risking anything on something you can't be certain of—but right now I'm not so sure. I am willing to bet I'll be dead before the end of the night. The odds seem pretty good.

My body's revolting against me. I am so goddamn weak, it takes actual effort to walk without weaving. I'm freezing from the inside out,

which makes no sense because I'm sweating from every pore, barely able to tolerate the thin layer of fabric I'm wearing without passing out.

Two days have passed since the night Col was nominated for chancellor of the first sector.

Apparently, to be considered for the role, a nominee has to receive at least five tokens from the population of Pirius. A teacher, a slight woman with a pinched look about her, received eleven hundred tokens. An elderly man, a former Commonwealth fighter with a shock of white hair, received seven hundred. Despite Darius' words, Chancellor Farren received nearly two thousand tokens in the ballot box. And Col? Col received just fourteen tokens. There's to be a vote in a week's time. I'm really hoping I've figured out a way to take Reza from here by then, or that I've died in my sleep. The politics of this dreary place depresses the hell out of me.

I haven't seen Reza since the Appointments Hall. She hasn't beckoned me to her in her sleep. I've thought about constructing a dreamscape and pulling her into it, but it costs energy to do that, and energy is one thing I don't have right now. I need Light. I need it like I need oxygen, and if I don't get it...

I shiver as I make my way through the tunnels toward the ready room, where Reza's agreed to meet with me again. I am sick of these observed

meetings Chancellor Pakka put in place. I'm sick of biding my time and waiting. I'm sick of being watched over like a disobedient dog. These rules and regulations are wearing thin and fast. It's a joke, really. Now that Reza's remembered all the time we've spent together, she should have done away with this nonsense. She should have come to me without the need of an allotted time and place. It's bullshit.

My bones feel like the burning embers of a fire as I wait. I tug on the invisible tether that exists between us, and there's a taut resistance on the other end: Reza, fighting the draw. Her resentment echoes loudly through the connection. She feels the pull toward me. Her body wants to respond, to tug right back, to draw *me* to *her*, and she hates it. The power behind the connection makes her uncomfortable. Scared. And the link is only getting stronger. I can feel it growing day by day, taking root inside me, claiming a little more of me every time I access it to sense where she is or what she's doing. My intrigue in her comes with a cost. In the past, that cost has been so small that it's been negligible. I've paid it without even thinking. Now, with the price increasing daily, requiring more and more of me, I'm beginning to spend a little more frugally.

When Reza finally arrives, Col is in tow behind her. Dark circles rim his eyes, and his shoulders

have rounded in on him over the past few days, giving him the look of a beaten down man. I'm the one gripped in the depths of withdrawal, craving something I can't have, and yet it looks as if Col's the one desperate for a fix. "I hear congratulations are in order," I say, when he sits down next to Reza on the other side of the table. "Nominated for chancellor. Very auspicious."

Col sinks back into his chair, rubbing tiredly at his left eye. "I'm not going to be chancellor. It's all Darius. He didn't even consult me before he made that announcement."

I reach out and read him a little, looking for the lie. He must be glowing inside with pride that there's even the slightest chance he could be selected to rule in his mother's footsteps. He must be secretly fantasizing about the perks that come with the job. The women he could sleep with, or the mischief he could make. There's no pride inside him, though. I probe a little deeper, scanning the perimeters of his mind, hunting for the guilty, hidden little corner where his dark thoughts live. I find no corner. I find nothing except exhaustion, pain, sorrow and grief.

"Stop," Reza hisses. "Stop that right now. It's not your place. Col deserves his privacy, just like anyone else."

Col's eyes widen, flitting from Reza to me. "I thought it hurt when you looked inside my head."

“It does,” I answer. “When I *want* it to. Pain makes it hard for people to hide things. Sometimes it’s easier to sneak in and out undetected, though.” I had no idea Reza would be able to tell I was invading Col’s mind. I had no idea it was possible for anyone else to detect that kind of thing. Perhaps she’s learning how to read our connection, the same way I’ve learned to. Perhaps...

I lay my hands flat on the table, rocked by my last thought. Perhaps she’s been able to sense the agony burning inside me. Perhaps she’s been able to detect just how much I’ve been suffering over the past two days. I look at Reza, and she gives me a knowing look at that makes my teeth hurt. Fuck. How could I have assumed she wouldn’t want to investigate the link between us? She has an inquisitive mind. She wants to know how things work, and she wants to be able to defend herself. The link between us is a danger to her. It’s no surprise that she would want to understand it and potentially learn how to sever it.

It’s a rude awakening that my secrets might not be safe. I haven’t had to erect high walls around my mind. For as long as I’ve served the Construct, no one has been capable of looking inside my head. The elders assumed I was the only person left in the galaxy capable of such a thing. If they knew Reza might be able to do the things I can do...? If they knew these seers still existed here on Pirius...?

I would not have enjoyed such an untouchable position amongst the Construct ranks, that's for certain. I would have had to toe the line much more than I did. I am far stronger than Reza, though. And the seers were nothing more than children, playing at grown up games. Without access to their visions now, they're even less than that. I barricade my mind, shutting out the link to Reza, and her face registers surprise. Have I ever severed the link before? Have I ever disconnected us so abruptly? I don't think I have. And I don't think she *can* sever it. If she could, it would be cut every second of every day, I have no doubt in my mind. Reza leans back into her chair, an expression of brief bewilderment on her face. Col arches an eyebrow, leaning in to whisper to her. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"Yes. Yes, I was just dizzy for a moment. I'm fine now, though. Better than fine, actually. I feel *normal*." She laughs, a breathless, happy sound, and suddenly I want to reconnect with her again. I want to feel what she's feeling down the link. I want to experience her happiness and her surprise for myself. Feeling Reza's happiness down our bond is intoxicating. Experiencing her joy has always, confusingly, been a much more intense a high than the Light that flows through my veins.

Reza meets my gaze and blinks quickly, the relief in her eyes clear. Being free of me is a gift.

Being able to simply be herself without the weight of another consciousness tethered to her is a blissful reprieve. For me, feeling Reza's mind on the other end of that line has been a reassurance I've enjoyed in a lot of ways.

"Fine. Let's get on with this then," Col says. "The sooner you have the information you require from Reza, the sooner we can all get on with our lives. We have a ship we can give you, Jass. The storms will break in a couple of days. There'll be a number of launch windows. It'd be better for everyone concerned if you leave during one of those windows."

I stab my fingernail into the grain of the slowly rotting wooden table between us, a sardonic grin stretching my mouth into a grimace. "You've given up on our life-long friendship, then, Pakka. I told you common sense would prevail."

Col shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "If you haven't noticed, one of my mother's visions was recently proved to be wrong," he says quietly. "When a seer dies, their visions become fluid. Shifting and changeable. They can be affected by the ebb and flow of other seers' visions. So... yes. I'm sure my mother's vision of us becoming friends was nothing more than a glitch. A weird, cosmic joke the galaxy played on her. On *me*. I've put it out of mind." He seems chagrined, as if he's mad at himself for even contemplating such a bizarre

turn of events would ever be true. Col clears his throat in a perfunctory manner, pulling his chair a little closer to the table. “Ask your questions, Beylar. You have thirty minutes, and then I have to leave.”

I glance at Reza, assessing the awkward way her arms are folded around her body. So she hasn’t told Pakka about the previous meetings we’ve shared. She hasn’t told him that we know each other far more than he could possibly ever know.

“Why do you even need to be here in the first place?” I ask, still smiling.

“To protect Reza, of course.”

“And how would you do that? How would you save her life if I took that knife from the inside pocket of your vest and I pressed it up against her throat?”

A long second passes, where we stare at each other. Col has a decision to make. He needs to decide whether I really am going to take his knife from him and attack Reza with it, or if I’m not. I see him searching for the truth in my eyes. I feel him picking me apart as best he can. He narrows his eyes after a moment, the tension that’s been building in his shoulders loosening a little. Apparently he’s made up his mind: I’m not going to assault anyone today. Grand.

I turn my attention to Reza. “What do you remember of your home planet?”

She blinks at me, confused. Eyes as green as the infinite fields that used to surround The Nexus, before the Construct stripped the landscape bare and turned it into a barren, rocky, unforgiving place. “I don’t understand,” she says. “I remember nothing. I was only seven when the Construct—”

“What kind of place was it?” I press. “A water planet? A sandy, desert planet, like Pirius? A planet of forests and trees for miles in every direction? What did it *look* like, Reza?”

She shakes her head quickly, looking down at the table. “I’m not sure. When I think back to that place, all I remember is...panic. The day the Construct ships broke through the atmosphere and opened fire on the city.”

“So there was a city.” I clench my jaw, trying not to grind my teeth together so hard. This is just so frustrating. If I could slip into her mind freely, I could access memories she doesn’t even know she still possesses. There’s something very different about the memories I can see inside someone else’s mind compared to the way they see them themselves. They’re more faithful and exact. They’re unclouded by emotions. A person’s own emotions always distort their recollection of events and places. As an outsider, I can sift through traumatic experiences without getting sucked into dread and anxiety that goes hand in hand with them.

Reza nods, her eyes glazing over. “A city with tall spires. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Wide, paved streets. And great white buildings with high columns. Always busy. Always bustling.”

Bile rises in the back of my throat, sharp and unpleasant. “And the people. What do you remember about them?”

Reza’s face crumples. “I don’t know. Nothing really.”

“Were they doctors? Architects? Flight technicians? What did they do every day? What was their purpose?”

“I don’t know, Jass. I was too young to know.” Frustration tinges her voice—she obviously doesn’t like thinking about this stuff—but I’m not going to cease my line of questioning now. Not when we’re finally getting somewhere. And she made a promise. A stupid bargain that we both know is a farce, and I’ve held up my end of the deal.

“Think. Try harder. The information’s right there in your head. You just need to dig a little deeper is all.”

“Hey. She said she doesn’t remember. You’re can’t force her to remember something if the information just isn’t there.” Col is terse and edgy. The stresses of the past few days are finally taking their toll on him; he looks like he hasn’t been sleeping, which, for once, has nothing to do with me. I haven’t been traipsing around inside *his*

dreams at all. I flash him a disingenuous, tight smile, showing him my teeth.

“Just trying to show a little encouragement,” I tell him. “She *does* have the information trapped inside that skull of hers. I’m just trying to help her get it out.”

“Why do you want to know about my home planet, anyway?” Reza asks. “It doesn’t have anything to do with Pirius, or the Construct for that matter. My people have been dead for cycles.”

“I’m just intrigued, I suppose. Why did the Construct destroy them?”

“I’ve no idea why. Do they even *need* a reason to wipe out entire planets? When I was trapped on the Invictus, the elders ordered us to destroy seventeen planets in total, and I never knew why. It seemed utterly random.”

This doesn’t surprise me. The Construct doesn’t share the logic or reasoning behind their actions with the lower echelons of the order. Why should they? A soldier’s life is basic obedience and nothing more. A soldier who asks why is a soldier who is no longer reliable as a blunt implement you can wield to do your bidding. They must either be promoted or destroyed, and promotions are almost impossible to come by in the Construct.

“As far as what drove my people,” Reza continues. “I’m not sure. They weren’t designers or healers. As far as I can piece together, they were

intellects. Scientists. People traveled to meet with them from all over the galaxy. There were always very important people visiting.” She closes her eyes, frowning, bowing her head. “The streets were always lined with streamers and banners. There were celebrations every other day. Everyone was smiling all the time. Everyone was happy. I think... I think my parents were important. I remember a lot of people coming to see them all the time. There were men in strange robes who came many times, and they were always very grateful when they left. They hugged my mother a lot.”

“Did you ever hear them talk of a weapon?” I ask slowly. “A new kind of weapon they were going to build and sell?”

Reza’s eyes open slowly. She lifts her head, and the connection tugs at my insides, insistently pushing at my defenses, demanding to be let in. It’s grown stronger even as we’ve sat here talking. Reza notices it, too. She blanches as she tilts her head to one side and flares her nostrils. “I know nothing about a weapon. My parents weren’t involved in things like that.”

So sure. So self-righteous. How can she speak with such authority and confidence, if she claims to remember so little? I do my best to hide my annoyance, though it’s difficult. “Okay. I believe you,” I say, folding my arms across my chest. “There must be something else you remember

about the place, though,” I say. “The weather. The seasons. The suns. The transport, or the music, or the—”

“The blood sun,” Reza whispers. She’s distant right now, as if she’s become untethered from this reality and she’s floated off somewhere far away. “Every few cycles, there was a blood sun. The entire star would turn crimson in the sky, and the city would be bathed in red light. I don’t know why it happened, or how long it lasted, but I remember the blood sun was very important to my people. It brought with it prosperity, luck and happiness, or...”

Even Col seems interested. “Or?”

“Or it brought misery, pain, and misfortune,” Reza finishes. “During the first hours of the blood sun’s arrival, everyone stood out in the streets, their heads craning up to watch the star rise in the sky. They’d all be waiting to see what happened. If...” She pauses. “If the blood sun was clear in the sky when it first appeared, all would be well. But if the sky was cloudy and the corona of the sun was obscured, people believed it was an ill omen.”

“Tragic superstitions,” I whisper under my breath. There’s a tightness in my belly, though. A rigidity that’s making me nauseous. Brushing my hair back out of my face, I lean across the table, focusing all of my attention on Reza. She’s so damn beautiful. Her hair is sandy brown, but more

interesting than that—shot through with gold and silver, as if it's woven from fine, precious metals. Her long, wispy fringe is very pale, bleached by the suns, though it looks as though it's been kissed by moonlight instead. The freckles scattered across the slender bridge of her nose are delicate and faint, but they lend her a girlish quality that makes her look younger than she really is. Her mouth is full, swollen from the frequency with which she chews at her lips when she's nervous, which is all of the time. Despite her nerves, though, there's a fire inside of her. An inferno that will consume anyone who stands in her way. I can see it plain as day, even if she can't. *Yet*. She will, though. She'll soon recognize the powerful flame that's helped her survive this long in such a hostile environment, and she'll learn to use it to her advantage. A wave of nausea tumbles over me, making my vision dance a little, and out of nowhere I feel as if I'm about to pass out. I take a hold of myself, forcing myself to sit up straight in my chair, refusing to let my consuming need for Light rear its ugly head. It's getting harder and harder to ignore, though. Day and night, unless I'm thinking about Reza, I'm obsessed by the idea of trekking out into the dunes to try and find my military bag.

“What else happened during this blood sun?” I ask, my breath skating over the words lightly, as I try and keep myself from shaking.

“Ceremonies. Rituals. Blessings. I can’t remember the specifics. If the sun was a harbinger of wealth and good fortune, on the night of its arrival there was always a grand celebration. A huge coliseum, with sweets and food, and dancing and music. I remember people laughing and chasing one another through the streets. My older sister kissed a boy who lived next door to us.” Reza’s face is filled with wonder, as if this is the first time she’s stretched these synapses, retrieving these particular snapshots from the lockers of her mind. “My sister...” She seems amazed by the very idea. “There was a great statue in the center of the coliseum,” she says, her voice lifting. “A respected leader of my planet. It was a tall bronze statue. People sat at its feet, playing instruments and telling jokes. It was so tall. I used to think it reached all the way up to the sky.”

There’s a cold fist around my heart, and its grip is tightening by the second. I feel like I can’t breathe let alone think. Reza looks up, dragging herself from her past back into the present. Her eyes meet mine, and I realize I’m staring at her.

“What? What is it?” she asks.

I tear my gaze away from her, so I’m staring straight ahead at the door behind Col. “Nothing. I was just thinking.” Lie. Lie. Lie. I was not thinking at all. I was reeling from the realization that’s just hit me, and I was doing a horrible job of hiding the

fact.

“This isn’t going anywhere,” Col says. “The meeting for the nominees starts soon and I can’t be late, anyway.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I thought you didn’t want to be chancellor?”

Col’s grimace would be comical if it didn’t make him look even more tired than he already does. “I don’t. But unfortunately my attendance at these things is mandatory. If I don’t show up at all, I get detained and held in the stockade for the day as punishment.”

Personally, the idea of Col trapped inside a stockade is kind of funny. I can see why he wouldn’t think so, though. “Go on then,” I tell him, gesturing to the door with a flick of my wrist. “We’ll continue on without you. I’m sure Reza will give you the cliff notes once you’ve fulfilled your civic duties.”

“Absolutely not.”

I rock my chair back, so it’s balancing on its rear legs. “And why not?”

“I was told specifically you weren’t to be left alone with her. And even though I’m growing more and more accustomed to your winning personality by the day, I still don’t trust that you have Reza’s best interests at heart. So if I have to go, so does she.” He turns to Reza, getting to his feet, a set look of determination on his face. Reza reaches up and

takes hold of him lightly by the wrist, though.

“I’m going to stay,” she tells him. “I’ll be okay. He’s had plenty of opportunities to kill me and he hasn’t.”

“I have *not*.” I wag my index finger at Col, who studiously ignores me.

“Reza, I know this whole thing is complicated, but being alone with him inside a locked room is an unnecessary risk. We can come back tomorrow.”

“Might all be dead by tomorrow,” I chip in. “With none of your friends able to see anything in their visions, who knows when the Construct are going to turn up and start setting things on fire?”

Col is silent for a moment, his eyes locked on Reza. At first glance, he seems calm, but tiny muscles pop and flex in his jawline, betraying his true feelings. “You really do know how to test a person, Beylar.”

Reza sighs, rubbing at her forehead with her free hand. “I’ll be fine, Col. I promise I can take care of myself. Darius has shown me how to defend myself, and I can keep him out of my head for as long as I need to. If I feel like things are getting out of hand, I’ll send word for you, I promise. Now go, before you miss your meeting and people start hurling rotten food at you.”

Col inhales, then stands stiffly. He seems trapped by indecision, his hands clenching and unclenching into fists at his sides, and then he turns

to face me. “I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer me honestly, if that’s even possible...”

“I’ve never lied to you, Col. I’ve never needed to.”

He seems unimpressed by my answer. “Did you kill my mother, Jass Beylar?”

I almost lose my balance and go toppling backward off the chair. I had no idea what he was going to ask me, but it wasn’t that.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Col says wearily. “She was already going to die. She knew that, and so did I. But dying in your sleep, peacefully, when your time’s up is one thing. Dying with a ceremonial knife in your stomach and your blood leaking out of your body is another thing altogether. It’s no coincidence that she died mere days after you showed up here. You can’t deny that.”

I can’t think of a single time when someone has accused me of killing someone and I actually *haven’t* done it. The irony of it is all rather overwhelming. I try not to laugh, because I don’t think that will do my cause many favors. “I didn’t kill her, Col. I swear it to you. I had no reason to hurt her. Aside from being annoyed at her, of course. I know I can be hot-headed, but I don’t tend to expend the energy it takes to kill someone over something so futile.”

Col’s going to hit me. I think he’s going to try,

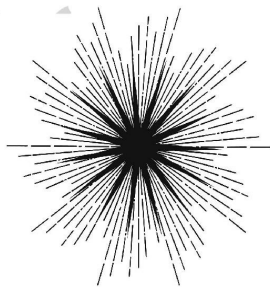
at least. He stands absolutely still, his feet firmly planted a hip's width apart, violence all over him. He wants to hurt me. He wants to have found the architect of his mother's untimely demise, and he wants to make me pay for my crimes. The trouble is...he believes I'm telling the truth, which is making him even madder. If I—the only confirmed cold-blooded murderer in the sub city—didn't kill Erika, then that poses bigger problems for Col. Crime hasn't existed here for a long time by all accounts. How could it, when everyone knew who was going to do what to whom and when? But now that the population of Pirius has been sightless for so long, the people here are unaccountable for the crimes, unless they're stupid enough to get caught red-handed. Col spins around and heads for the door, obviously seething.

“If you need anything, Reza, make sure you send for me,” he says tightly. He slams the door behind him so hard that a small shower of dirt and sand falls from the ceiling. The particles settle in Reza's hair and on her eyelashes like a fine ash. She doesn't dust them away. Angling her head and tilting her chin, there's a defiant fire burning inside her as she stares me down,

“Okay. We're alone. How about we stop with the games,? Why are you asking me about my home planet? And why haven't you asked me before, inside the dreams?”

“I tried. You weren’t truly whole, though. Your memory was all over the place. You could never give me a straight answer. None of that matters, Reza. *Now*, I know the truth. You and I are more alike than I first thought. This connection between us...it’s not some random, accidental thing. It’s far more than that.” She grows paler and paler as I speak, and my hands begin to shake under the table. I’ve had my theories about Reza for a very long time now, but verifying them has turned my head upside down. I don’t want her to see that. I don’t want her to know...

“We’re not just similar. It’s no miracle that you can resist me where others can’t. Your ability to reach down the tether that connects us in the same way I can, is no fluke. We are the same, Reza. We both hale from the same planet. The cradle of all human life amongst the stars. We are the last remaining true survivors of Earth.”



NINETEEN

REZA

LIGHT

Earth.

Nothing more than a myth.

A legend.

A story mothers tell their babes to put them to sleep. A story of bountiful life and plentiful pastures. The origin planet for more than ninety percent of all evolved species in the galaxy. Jass can't be telling the truth. There's so little chance he and I share any sort of heritage. The chances are a million to one. But now he's asking me to believe we both came from *Earth*? I don't think so.

"I'm not *asking* you to believe me," Jass says. "I'm telling you what I know. I was born on Earth. It was exactly as you described. We were a planet of philosophers, educators and scientists. Every seven years, a blood sun filled the sky, and the

people of Earth gathered to discern their fate for the following cycle. As you said, a clear sky meant good luck and fortune. A sky shrouded in cloud meant trouble up ahead. The bronze statue that sat in the center of the coliseum was of a man called Arrotec Ja'En. He was responsible for bringing unity and government to the planet during its last period of unrest. I remember it all vividly. I was a little older than you were when the Construct came to eradicate us from the planet's surface. I remember the celebrations and the art. I remember the music. I remember the laughter."

"Everyone knows Earth's star exploded. That's why humans colonized the galaxy. The planet was destroyed millennia ago."

"The sun didn't explode. It cooled," Jass corrects. "Life became too difficult, resources too short, so people set off to build new lives for themselves on other planets. The sun still shone, though. It still rose and set every day. Plants still grew. Animals still bred. Seventy percent of the planet froze, but life was maintained. Life got better. And thousands of years later, you and I were born."

His voice catches in the oddest way. I have to do a double take to try and make sense of his intense expression. His skin has an odd tinge to it, slick with perspiration. It's as if the memories of this planet he speaks of are making him sick to his

stomach. On the other hand, though, I have been sensing his discomfort for the past two days. At first I thought it was a trick, that he was trying to fool me into believing he was ill so I wouldn't consider him a threat. I saw the moment he realized I could tell what he was feeling just now, though. I saw the moment of shock, and then I felt the tether between us falling immediately slack.

"You're not fooling around, are you?" I whisper. "You really believe we came from Earth."

"We *did*." His voice is hoarse. He opens his mouth to say something else, but no words come out. His eyes take on a vacant, distant haze, but he hasn't slipped off somewhere into his thoughts. It's perfectly obvious that he's struggling to think anything at all, as more and more beads of sweat streak down his forehead. An odd, sickly pink color has started to develop high on his cheeks—definitely not the vibrant flush of pink that healthy people exhibit. Jass' shoulders tremble a little as he leans forward, resting his elbow on the table in front of him. He clears his throat, then points at me accusingly. "You got off light, Reza. I'd already developed some of my talents when they came for me. If they knew you were like me, the elders would have made sure you received the same *education* I received. Maybe you *would* have ended up just like me." He laughs, and the sound of his amusement is more than a little unhinged.

Should I get up? Should I call for help?
Something doesn't seem right. It's as if he could snap at any moment. Out of nowhere, his mental walls suddenly come crashing down. The wave of emotion that hits me is enough to knock the breath from my lungs.

Pain. Sadness. Regret. Hurt. Hope. Fear.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

I feel the agony ripping through Jass with every persistent thrum of his heart, and it's almost too much to bear.

"What *wrong* with you?" I whisper.

Jass' normal sharp, vivid eyes are dark pools of confusion as he tries to get to his feet. "What *isn't* wrong with me?" He laughs, his mind reeling, the gates inside his head thrown wide open, and I can feel myself being drawn in, irrevocably pulled forward against my will. He's a drowning man, scrambling for a purchase on the closest riverbank, and that closest riverbank just so happens to be my sanity. I lurch out of my chair, about to rush for the door, to bolt into the hallway, to call for someone. To call for help? But then I realize I don't know who really needs the help—me or Jass. I stop in my tracks.

"You were there the whole time," he whispers

softly. “You were here, right underneath my nose. I wasn’t alone. I wasn’t...alone.”

With that, he topples sideways from his chair, eyes rolling back into his head...completely out cold.

“I’ve seen it before. A unique, clever little poison, really. Expensive. Hard to get hold of. Over time, the toxin builds up in your system, stored in fat, in muscle, in bone. Even in your hair. It’ll sit there quite happily and won’t cause an issue, so long as the antidote is administered on a daily basis along with it. If you stop taking the antidote, however, the toxins stored in your cells are gradually released over a period of days, making you sicker and sicker and sicker. It’s astonishing he’s lasted this long to be honest. His levels are just...” Darius shrugs, shaking his head. “It’s remarkable really. I’ve heard of the Construct drip-feeding Light to their most valuable prisoners. When the toxin and the antidote are administered at the same time, the result is quite euphoric for the recipient. They become reliant on the solution. Compliant. Never knowing that it could be used to kill them at any moment. It really was clever of the Construct to harness Jass like this. If he stepped out of line, it would have been easy enough to put him

down. I doubt they had any idea his body was this resilient, though.”

I hug my arms tighter around my body, looking down on Jass’ prone body, still unconscious and sweating under a sheet in Darius’ quarters. “So he’s going to die, then.” My voice is a hollow, uncertain thing.

“I can’t tell. Probably. I knew he was suffering. Suspected it was this. I offered to help him days ago but he refused me. I’ve been waiting for him to end up here ever since.”

It’s cold in Darius’ private chamber; a chill breeze has found its way in here somehow, and it snakes its way around my bare ankles and teasing its way down the back of my shirt. I shiver involuntarily, trying to make sense of what I’m being told. “So after all the stress and the fear... After feeling chased and watched for so long... Now that he’s here, he’s just going to *die*? And that will be the end of it?”

Darius adjusts the mesh mask he’s still wearing—he must have been out on the planet’s surface when he learned that Jass needed his attention. Fiddling with the ties at either side of his head, he makes quick work of the fastenings and slips the mesh off, tidying it away. “I’ll do my best, but if he’s been hooked on Light for a prolonged period of time, then it’s fairly likely. If that’s the case, you’ll be free, Reza. You’ll be able to leave this

place without fear of being followed or hunted. Isn't that what you've been waiting for?"

Gods, is it ever. There's not a day that's passed when I haven't fantasized about slipping onto a transport and simply vanishing into space. There are so many inhabitable planets now. So many places I could go and start over. I should be jumping for joy, staring at Jass' chest, waiting for it to stop rising and falling so I can move on with my life already, but that was before. Before I knew about the meetings I hid from myself. Before I knew about the affection and the softness he's shown me. Before all of the feelings I developed in those dreams came crashing down on me with an incomprehensible force. And, on top of that, I just learned that he and I share common blood. We come from the same place. There's no doubt he's wrong about that place being Earth, but his description of the city I was born in was really specific, down to the statue, and how many planets in this galaxy could possibly be affected by a blood sun? The similarities are too great to be discounted.

I've been putting off analyzing Jass' own feelings—a wall of emotional hurt that I would never have guessed resided inside the man. His pain crowded my head, shouting over the top of his other emotions, but it was his loneliness that hit me hardest. I had no idea he could even experience such a thing. I expected a desert wasteland inside

of Jass Beylar, much like the surface of Pirius, but instead what I found was a landscape of anguish and torment.

“You don’t want him to die,” Darius says. He wipes Jass’ face with a damp cloth with the same care and compassion he has shown countless others. There’s no judgment in his voice. No tone or inflection that might lead me to believe he thinks I’m crazy. I feel crazy, though, because he’s right. I *don’t* want Jass to die. If I’d learned this had happened to him weeks ago, I would have been crowing from the dune tops, cartwheeling all over the place. I would have felt like I’d been set free. But now, after witnessing the kaleidoscope of turmoil inside the man who has spent so long searching for me? Along with everything else I’m feeling right now? I just don’t know what I’m supposed to think.

“You don’t need to be ashamed,” Darius tells me. “Jass has a reputation. A black cloud follows him wherever he goes. That doesn’t mean you have to wish death upon him.” He raises Jass’ left arm, ties a length of material around it, then flicks at a vial of clear liquid he’s drawn into a syringe. My stomach balks as I watch the sharp needle disappear into Jass’ arm. I’m not normally queasy, but there’s something unsettling about watching the metal pierce his skin.

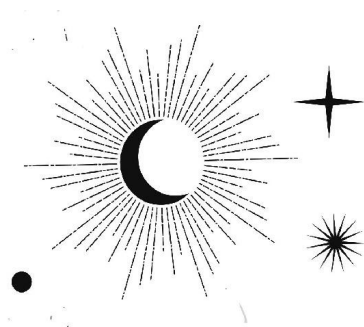
“It seems like a betrayal to feel that way,” I say

in a hushed voice. “Like I’m betraying all the people who’ve died at his hands.”

Darius sighs heavily, laying Jass’ arm gently down onto the cot. He huffs again, apparently struggling with whatever it is he wants to say next. After a painful moment of silence, punctuated by Jass’ labored breathing, he sits himself down on the edge of the cot and laces his long fingers together, fixing me with a penetrating look. “The Light the Construct have been feeding Jass with has numerous side affects, Reza. Euphoria. Shortened temper. Heightened senses. And a complete disregard for others and their wellbeing. The solution acts as a dampener for nearly all emotion. I’m the last person to make excuses for such a notorious member of the Construct, but there’s a very real chance Jass wouldn’t have followed the orders he was given if he wasn’t dosed up to the eyeballs on that stuff. That depends entirely on the person he was before he became addicted to the toxin, of course. But I like to think most creatures in this galaxy are good at their core. They deserve the benefit of the doubt. Convincing other members of the Commonwealth that Jass deserves a second shot isn’t going to be easy, though. Jass would have to be clean of the Light. And not only that. He would have to actually *want* a second chance.”

Such incendiary words. I would never have been brave enough to say them out loud, but I have

been wondering what will happen once the citizens of the sub city finally discover who they have living amongst them. What will become of Jass? Who will he be once the toxins the Construct has been pumping him with are cleared from his system? His mind might be clearer, perhaps the full extent of his emotions will return to him over time, but there really is no guarantee any of that will change who he is. Who he's been for such a long time now. He'll still be as strong. Still be able to reach into people's minds and control them at his own leisure. I look down at him lying on the cot, his hair a wild, dark halo spread out around his head in thick waves, his eyelids flickering gently as he dreams, and a fog of doubt clouds my mind. What's going on his head right now, as his body desperately fights to heal itself? Is he dreaming of fields of bodies, slaughtered and decaying at his feet? Whole planets bending the knee, worshiping him as a god? Or is he dreaming of something else? Something far less sinister. I can't help it. Can't stop myself from wondering it. Is he dreaming of *me*?



TWENTY

JASS

INFERNO

Even the dark hurts my eyes. I've endured the bottomless depths of oblivion before, but then I felt nothing. Here, trapped within my own head, unable to move or speak, the very nothingness itself causes me pain. I float on a sea of emptiness, untethered and cast out. Every time I struggle to open up my lungs and fill them with oxygen, I curse myself for succumbing to my desperate need to breathe. If I could avoid the agony of simply existing at this point, I would do it. I would die, and I'd be damned grateful to shuffle loose this mortal coil. It would be better than suffering through this damned void, where nothing seems to work except my nerve endings and the corresponding pain receptors in my brain. Oh, and my ears. My ears seem to be

working just fine, which is both a blessing and a curse.

Somewhere close by a water spigot is leaking, and the constant, steady *drip, drip, dripping* is driving me insane. I can't shut the sound out. I can't turn the spigot the three millimeters it requires to stem the flow of water, and so I have to endure the repetitive torture of it, without any way to block it out. So damn frustrating. Darius comes in and out, humming to himself a lot. He's not a very good singer, but at least his tuneless attempts at melodies ease the dripping for short periods of time. I have no idea what he does as he comes and goes, but often the burning smell of camphor oil and smoke fills the room, or some other light, herbal, vaguely unpleasant smell, and I know he's about to tend to me, rubbing poultices and thick, cloying substances onto my chest. At first I hated the contact; I mustered up enough mental strength to knock the bowl of ointment from the seer's hand, sending it flying. I could only do it once, though; my mind was exhausted from the effort of a small, inconsequential action that I'd normally be able to accomplish without a second thought, and I'm pretty sure Darius could tell. He's continued to use the lotion on me at regular intervals, and for a brief period after each application, it's easier for me to breathe.

Other times, I hear Reza. She comes and goes,

never saying a word, but I recognize the cadence of her footfall, and the cautious, uneven draw and pull of her breathing. The link between us is gone. Even when I force the limits of my mind as far they'll go, I can't sense her the way I could before. There's no echo of her inside my head at all. Nothing. It's as if the link has been severed altogether, cut through once and for all, and she's simply...gone. Only she isn't, because she comes to me of her own volition. She watches over me, and she waits, and I can feel the tension pouring off her. I didn't have time to analyze the way she was feeling about her memories of *us* before all this happened. I don't know if they've affected her opinion—or her fear—of me. I don't know anything, and the not knowing is killing me.

I'm about as vulnerable as a person can be right now; she could use a pillow to smother me. She could overdose me with any number of drugs and potions that Darius surely has to hand. Reza could kill me without even breaking a sweat, and yet she doesn't. Ending a life has become second nature to me, but I've seen how confronting the task can be for others. How their hands shake, and their hearts falter. Stupid, reckless, soft hearts. Mine is carved out of steel.

Time passes strangely. There's no day and night inside the crevasse that's formed inside of me. I have no way of knowing how long I've lain here

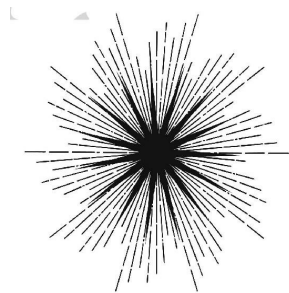
for, but it feels as though lifetimes pass, one after the other. I shake and I tremble, and Darius rubs more salve onto my chest. I shake and I tremble. I shake and I tremble. More salve. More sweating. More endless drifting in the dark.

Until...

Eventually, the shaking lessens. The raging fire inside my veins dims to a subtle flicker, and my mind begins to awaken again. It feels as though I'm underwater, deep, way below the surface, where the light cannot penetrate, and I don't really know which way is up. I begin to feel my body, and I immediately wish I couldn't. The pins and needles that penetrate my skin feel more like spears. After a while, I begin to feel the tether again, connecting me to Reza. I can't feel anything through the link. I have no idea where she is or what she's thinking, but the knowledge that the connection is still there, joining us, is a massive relief.

For once, the void inside me no longer feels like a prison.

I finally sleep.



TWENTY-ONE

REZA

PETTING ZOO

“You’re going to have to go in there and get him.”

I don’t want to climb inside Jass’ head and pull him out of it, but Darius won’t leave the matter well alone. It’s been a week. Nine days during which Jass has stopped tossing and turning, straining against his own flushed, feverish skin, and he’s just lain there on Darius’ cot, silent, still, with an air of death hanging over him.

Darius removes the IV that’s been in Jass’ arm for days, rubbing alcohol onto his skin to clean it. “If he doesn’t wake up soon, his body will begin to atrophy. His muscles will weaken. His cells will begin to die. The flow of blood to his brain is steady, but his internal organs are slowing. The nutrients I’ve been giving him are doing their job, but they’re no match for real food and water.”

I push away from the wall, moving to stand next to my friend. “Maybe a weak Jass wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Now we know he’s not going to die, it might be beneficial to make sure he’s not operating at full capacity when he wakes up.”

Darius gives me a disapproving sideways glance. “Purposefully clipping an animal’s wings sounds like something the Construct would do.”

I think this is the harshest thing the man’s ever said to me. He knows making a comment like that is going to chaff at me. I scowl at him, cursing under my breath. “Okay, fine. I can try it, but the bond’s never worked this way before. I’ve never gone to him. He’s always been the one sneaking into my mind, unannounced. I have no idea how to do it. Or even if I can.” I don’t mention the dreams. Technically, I did go to him on those occasions, but I was unconscious. I have no idea how I called out to him, helped him lift me into the dreamscapes he created, but it must be possible. I just don’t have a clue where to start.

“If *he* can do it, *you* can do it,” Darius says firmly. “You’re from the same planet. There’s no reason you’d be capable of anything less than Jass. You just need to focus. Visualize your goal. It will happen naturally.”

I kept Jass’ revelation to myself for a while after Darius had him moved to his quarters. I needed time to process. To understand. To try and

figure out what the news that I share a heritage with Jass Beylar might mean to me. I made absolutely no headway, though, and I cracked. I confided that in Darius at least, who made an unimpressed grunting noise in the back of his throat and continued on his work. He completed a barrage of tests, though, drawing vial after vial of blood from both myself and from Jass, poring over the results and all the while frustratingly calm and silent. After much humming and squinting, he gave me his conclusion: Jass and I are complicated. He didn't learn much, beyond the fact that our DNA confirmed we are indeed from the same planet. Darius suspected the mental link we share could have had something to do with a familial bond, but when he took a closer look, our specific genetic coding was vastly different. We don't even share distant relatives, let alone close ones.

"I'm going to eat," Darius tells me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Perhaps while I'm gone, you could attempt to talk to him at least. Please. For me. Don't pull faces, Reza. It won't kill you. At least...I don't think it will." He laughs as he leaves his quarters, and once again I find myself alone with the dark-haired man sleeping on the bed.

I've spent a considerable amount of time here over the past week, and during that span of days I've had plenty of opportunities to study him. At first I avoided looking at him at all, expecting his

eyes to open at any moment and find me staring at him, but when the tether fell slack and Jass stopped moving, I grew bolder. I learned the features of his face. The slope of his shoulders. His corded arms. I committed the powerful lines of his muscled chest and stomach to memory. I found myself staring at the fullness of his mouth, unable to look away.

To my horror, I've repeatedly fallen back into my newfound memories, replaying what his lips feel like on mine, and each time it's felt like a bucket of scalding hot water being thrown over me.

I've fought and railed as hard as I can to keep such inappropriate, impossible things from my head since then, but...it's proving harder and harder to accomplish. I'm constantly trying to convince myself that I don't care about him. That he means nothing to me.

I shake myself, scrambling to pull myself together as I perch gingerly on the edge of Jass' cot. Without Darius here in his quarters, I feel like I'm intruding somehow, spying on someone while they're sleeping. Jass isn't asleep, though. His consciousness has fled inside his body, and it won't come out. His body is nothing more than a hollow husk. I don't know if that makes my awkward, frightening thoughts of him better or worse.

Ever since I felt the connection between Jass and I for the very first time, I've done everything I

can to avoid it. To shut it out. To close it off, and prevent it from opening up a doorway inside my head. It feels counterintuitive now to do the opposite.

I focus on Jass' face, the very first twinges of panic twist in my gut. What if I can't do this? What if he *can* do things I can't? And...what if I can do it? Where will stepping into his mind lead me? What dark corners of his psyche will I find myself tumbling through? What the hell am I going to say to him once I find him? And, most worryingly of all, will I be able to find my way out?

Jass' eyelids flutter, a soft frown marking his face, and I'm hit by the ridiculousness of the situation. He looks so calm. So peaceful. So... breathtakingly handsome. *Gods*. I bow my head, breathing deep, fighting the urge to get up and run from the room as fast as I can. How can this man be responsible for so much disruption and chaos in the galaxy? How can he be the reason so many children are without parents? Without food? Without water? Without a home over their heads? How can he be the reason I've lived in fear for so long now, too petrified to live my life? And how can I still want him so badly?

It just goes to show that appearances can be deceptive. A creature that looks harmless, even approachable and inviting one minute, can be the very same creature that lashes out and takes your

head off the next.

The connection pops and crackles inside my head as soon as I seek it out, tentatively grasping hold of it in my mind. I'm shocked by the potent flow of energy that courses through me as soon as I surrender myself to the link. It feels odd. Like a piece of me snapping into place. I've always felt as if there was something missing inside me, something absent and distant, lost even. As soon as I stop resisting the connection, it feels so *right*. As if that missing part of me has now returned and I'm whole again. It's more than that, though. I'm more than whole. I feel empowered. Alive, and rejuvenated. Like I can do anything. Lying on the cot, Jass twitches, his fingers opening and closing in his dreams. He sighs lightly, and the gentle frown he was wearing eases, disappearing.

The connection pulls at me, asking for more, and a thrill of panic dances up my spine. I should have told Darius to stay. If something goes wrong and I can't resist this, it would have been better if he were here. He could have forced me out, maybe. Brought me back to reality. I'm alone right now, though; I'm going to have to rely on my own mental fortitude to make sure I don't lose myself completely to this thing.

Gods, I hope this works.

I hope I'm strong enough.

I hope...fuck, I hope this isn't the most stupid

I've ever done.

I release the last, remaining strands of resistance within my mind, holding me back, and I allow myself to fall.

The sensation that hits me is more than a suggestion of emotion or surroundings. It is lightness. It is darkness. It is a blurring and a sharpening of reality all at once. It is hot and cold, and right and wrong, and the dizzying depths of it all surging through me at once makes my heart stutter in the most dangerous way. For a second I'm blind, lost inside a rush of power. A bizarre settling feeling takes hold, beginning at the soles of my feet, spilling upward, and when my sight returns to me moments later, I am no longer in Darius' quarters, looking down on Jass from above. I am lying on my back, my hands pinned high over my head, and Jass is straddling me, his knees gripping my ribcage between them, his dark hair hanging down over his face like a curtain. And he's staring at me with such a furious intensity that it seems as though he's attempting to set fire to me with nothing more than his anger alone.

"You're not supposed to be here," he hisses. His hands tighten around my wrists, stretching my arms a little higher over my head.

"You're not supposed to *hurt* me," I snarl back, trying to wrench myself free.

The boy on top of me angles his head,

scrutinizing me. His eyes are half-closed, but the gold is there inside his irises, sparking and flaring, as if they possess an energy all of their own, trapped inside them. “For an uninvited guest, you’re making a lot of assumptions about the rules of etiquette,” he whispers. “This is my mind, Reza. You think you can just drop in unannounced and expect tea and cake? Have you *met* me?”

He’s right. This *is* his mind. Technically, the rules of engagement in our little war don’t apply here. “Just let me up.” I fight to pull my wrists free from his grasp. “I came to talk to you, not wrestle.”

Jass smirks, the devastating smile starting off small but soon commandeering his whole face. Danger flares in his eyes. “A good thing. You’d never win.” He releases me, pushing back and rocking to the balls of his feet so he can stand up. Free of him, I take in my surroundings for the first time, and my breath leaves my body all at once. We’re in the middle of an amphitheater—one I recognize and that is unfamiliar at the same time. Rows of seating stretch up, up, up, a hundred tiers or more, wrapping their way around the entire amphitheater. Huge, white sails snap and billow on the breeze, giving some shade from the light of a single sun that balances like burnished silver coin in the sky directly overhead. A monstrous bronze statue lies toppled in the dirt at our feet. Huge chunks of rubble and debris litter the ground, and

the soft, cloying scent of decay hits the back of my nose. This is a dying, dead place, filled with clamoring voices, and yet aside from Jass and I, there isn't another soul in sight. I spin around, remembering and not remembering the place all at once.

"This...this is it, isn't it?" I whisper. "This place. I've been here before. This is the coliseum on...on..."

"You can say the word. *Earth*." Jass casts his gaze around, too, apparently bored. "And yes. So it would seem," he replies. "Filled with ghosts. Fucking horrible place."

I swallow, shielding my eyes against the sun as I search up, scanning the rafters. "Why have you brought us here, if you hate it so much?"

"I didn't bring us here. *You* did."

"That's not possible. I don't remember the place in this kind of detail. This is all you. It has to be."

Jass doesn't say anything. He watches me as I look around, his arms folded across his chest, his nostrils flared like a blood horse that's caught a scent. He's just as magnificent now as he is when he is awake. And, my senses inform me, just as perilous. I have to look away from him for a second in order to gather myself.

"You've been spending an awful lot of time watching over me," he whispers. "Nothing better to

do?"

I brush away his comment with neither skill nor grace. "The double eclipse is happening today. The Construct ships will be arriving any second now."

Jass grins, drumming his fingers against his side. "That's not true, is it?"

"Okay, fine. It isn't. But what if it were?"

"Then your seers are all about to die. *You* are about to die."

His bland, unfeeling response forms shards of ice in my blood stream. "You're here, too, Jass. If the Construct does strike us in the sub city, you'll die right along with us."

"Maybe. But if they suspect I might be down here, they'll come and claim me first. I'm not a weapon they can easily replace."

I take a step closer to him, steeling myself. I want to put more space between us, not close the gap, but...I can't seem to help myself. "Are you so sure? Col told me the Construct fighters didn't even try and follow you into the asteroid field when you left The Nexus. Surely they'd have stopped at nothing to pursue you then, if they value you so highly."

Jass doesn't flinch at my logic. He remains locked onto me, his face blank, but his mind is far from still. I can feel the activity of his thoughts firing in the very air that surrounds us, lightning fast. He's doing a stellar job of shielding them from

me, though. “Regis clings to his rulebook at all times. Construct edict dictates resources mustn’t be wasted in situations that offer less than an eight percent likelihood of success.”

I know the rulebook he’s speaking off. It’s a theoretical book—one I studied from cover to cover. Strapped to a chair in the Construct’s re-education center on the Invictus, I learned it line by line, in fact. Jass is right. Regis would never have allowed his valuable soldiers to follow Jass into that debris field without excellent odds of retrieving him.

“I’m their best pilot,” Jass continues. “I can’t be matched, and Regis knew that. Here, on the ground, trapped inside a maze of tunnels, though? He’ll have me cornered with no way out. He *will* come for me here.”

“Do you *want* him to?” I whisper.

I look for the confusion on his face. The conflict, urging him in two directions at once, but it doesn’t materialize. “Yes. I need to return to The Nexus.”

“*Why?*” The word explodes from me, echoing off the broken, shattered remnants of the coliseum where thousands of our people used to gather in celebration. A single, solitary bird wildly flits from the upper tiers, wheeling and spinning all over the place, its cries filling the sky. One second, it’s there, the next it is gone. Jass pretends as if he doesn’t

notice it, but I can see the pulse jumping at his neck, the same way it's jumping at mine. With the ferocious dust storms that pound the surface of Pirius, I haven't seen a bird take flight in...I can't remember the last time I saw something so beautiful. Jass blinks, bending down to touch the dirt at his feet with his fingertips. He contemplates the tiny rocks and the grains of sand, no longer looking at me.

"I have a purpose," he says grimly.

"Death? Murder? Disorder? They are the only purpose you can have if you go back to the Construct. Is that what you want?"

"I don't *want* anything," he replies. "That's the beauty of the Construct. There is no room for want. Or hope. Or desire. There is only the chain of command. There is only obedience, and respect."

"Now you're the one who's lying to himself." I narrow my eyes at him. He hasn't made any move to approach me since he let me up from the ground. I take another step forward. Honestly, I barely realize I'm doing it. "Is that what you need? Respect? Where's your heart, Jass Beylar? Your soul? Your conscience? Can't you see that the Construct is wrong?" I throw my hands in the air, spinning around, gesturing to the once fine structure that now sits in ruins around us. "They destroyed our planet. They killed everyone we ever knew or loved. They took our home, and they took

our families. How can you want to return to them? I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense!"

I'm met with a wall of silence. Jass rises, straightening up. Then, in two long strides he's suddenly standing in front of me. He was this close to me when we were in the Appointments Hall after Erika was murdered, but he was standing behind me. I didn't have to look up into his face. I didn't feel the full force of his gaze burning into my skin. I do my best not to shrink away from the inferno that I can feel storming within his chest, but my head spins from the effort, threatening to betray me.

Jass floods my senses in the most penetrating way. My head is full of him, and there's no escape. I take a step backward but he follows me, mirroring my movement. "This galaxy is filled with hardship, Reza. Death and destruction have existed since the dawn of time, right alongside life and creation. It's all one and the same. There's no good and evil. There is only the ebb and flow of the universe, and the transference of power from one person to the next. One day, peace reigns. The next, chaos. If the Construct hadn't wiped out our people, then disease and pestilence would have eventually. Or civil war. Or natural disaster. Nothing in the universe is permanent. All things die. All things end. Every one of us has to choose how we navigate through the madness. I chose my pathway a long time ago. My course is set."

There's a finality to his words that makes me want to sever the connection between us immediately and escape his head. If he's telling the truth, then I'm wasting my time even talking to him right now. He's not going to help us. He's not going to sway or change his mind...or himself.

Jass whispers, his voice filling my head. "The trouble is that you want too much, Reza. You want happiness. You want freedom. You want peace. I see it all on your face, every time you look at me. You wear your emotions like they're a shield, but they won't protect you. You want everything to be simple and clean. You want a home. You want..." He trails off, clenching his jaw, the threads of gold blazing even brighter against the soft brown of his eyes. His lips part—he's going to finish what he was about to say—but then he stops himself.

A cold, heavy deadweight sits in my belly—shock, warring with my humiliation. I know exactly what he was going to say. *Exactly*. And I can't bear that he knows. Why doesn't he just do it? Why won't he simply spit the words out and get on with it? I want *him*.

Jass moves slowly, reaching up to brush a strand of hair out of my face. His eyes are wide. Shocked. As if he can't even believe he's doing it himself. His fingertips graze my cheekbone, barely a touch at all, a feather-light moment of contact, but he might as well have struck me across the

face. We both flinch at the same time, and Jass pulls his hand away like I'm the one who's hurt *him*. "I couldn't sense you," he whispers, "but I know you've been here. I've felt you all the same. I know how badly you hate yourself for wanting me, Reza. It doesn't have to be that way. It could be much, *much* simpler."

"I don't know what you mean." Even I know it's ridiculous to deny how I feel, especially since he seems so much better at reading me than I am at reading him, but I do it all the same. He is so, *so* broken. And exactly how damaged am I if I can't stop just turn around and walk away?

Jass shakes his head, clenching his jaw even harder, so the muscles in his cheek jump. "You can't save me," he says.

"I'm not interested in saving you," I snap. "I only care about saving Pirius. Darius and his people helped me when I crashed here. They protected me as best they could. If I can't help them by convincing you to help defend them, then I should go."

I turn, ready to walk away from him, to release my hold on the connection that binds us and return to my own mind, but Jass lunges for me. He grabs me, his fingers pressing into my arm, spinning me back around. My chest crushes up against his, and I feel the wild surge of his pulse, slamming through his veins. He folds his arms around me, steel bands

holding me in place, and I freeze, immobilized by the violent, demanding way he pins me in his gaze. “Do you think I want to care about you?” he whispers. “Do you think I wouldn’t kill *you* if I could?”

I raise my chin in defiance, returning his anger, reflecting it right back at him. “What’s stopping you?”

“You know damn well what’s stopping me. You know it can’t be denied. It would be easier to kill myself than it would be to harm a hair on your damn head. If you die...” His face pales, a grey shadow suddenly giving his skin a sick, stricken pallor. “If you die, there will be no restraining me, Reza. I will set this galaxy on fire and I will watch it burn fiercer than the stars. I will make sure I live until every single light has gone out. I will tear, and I will rampage, and I will torture every last living soul until I am the only nightmare, the only dark thing left breathing, and only then will I be able to allow my blackened soul to escape me and give this place any kind of peace.”

He doesn’t move quickly. If he did, I could be excused for what happens next. If he pounced, I could claim he took me by surprise, but Jass moves slowly, cautiously, and with obvious intent. The sound of my heart beat pounds inside my head like a frenzied drum as Jass lowers his mouth down to mine. I am locked in place, unable to move, unable

to breathe, unable to think.

Is this...?

Do I want...?

Should I try to...?

How can I...?

His lips meet mine, and my fractured questions disappear. His touch is soft at first, barely there, nothing more than a suggestion. I try not to react, but my body won't allow such a deception. My legs are about to buckle from underneath me. It's hard to tell if they do or not, because Jass holds me tighter, crushing me in his arms, practically lifting me from my feet. Every square inch of my skin hums and prickles, energy biting at my nerve endings as Jass increases the pressure he's applying to my mouth. His lips part, insistent and demanding; my own lips follow suit, obliging him of their own volition, opening wider, allowing his tongue to slip past them. He massages and explores me, filling my head with fire until the amphitheater around us flexes and warps, vanishing altogether. I pay no attention. The world is darkness and silence, and there is nothing but Jass' arms, holding me in place. Nothing more than his mouth on mine. Nothing more than his tongue, searching and tasting. His scent is overpowering, the warmth of his body maddening and frustrating. He kisses me with such a need that I know it will claim me. Perhaps that same need claimed me a long time

ago. I fight it as long as I can, but it's useless.

My surrender is catastrophic. I crumble, my body taking control, and then I'm kissing him back. I slide my own tongue into his mouth, and I am lost. The connection between us explodes. Jass gasps for breath at the same moment I do, and we're both swept away by the force of it. I'm being pulled to him even now, when there is no more space left between us, and the sensation obliterates any remaining control I might have. I reach up, running my hands along the taut, strong lines of his back until I reach his hair, and I wind my fingers into the thick, waviness of it. I've wanted to tangle my fingers through his hair from the moment I set eyes on him in person. It made no sense. It made me feel dirty and wrong, but still...the urge was there regardless.

Jass groans breathlessly; the sound is incredible, desperate almost, and I can't help but react. I arch my back, curving my body into him. Jass' arms loosen a little and then he releases me, running his hands up the length of my body, too. He doesn't sink his hands into my hair as I did to him. He cups my face in both his hands and he kisses me even harder, stealing my breath.

I sink. I fall. I die, and I am reborn a thousand and one times in his arms, and the sensation never seems to end. The connection between us wasn't the piece of me that was missing. It was *Jass*. *He* is

my other half. And now that he's holding me, kissing me, staking a claim on me in the most invasive, personal, mind-blowing manner possible, I can't seem to figure out where I end and he begins. It's amazing. It's bewildering. It's everything.

It's...wait...

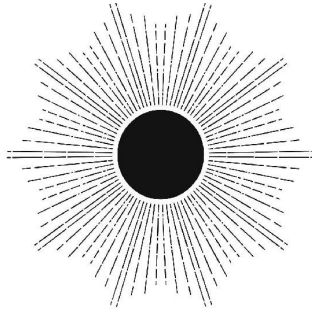
It's terrifying.

I unravel my hands from Jass' hair, quickly shoving him as hard as I can, pushing him away. The vacuum yanking at my insides is instant and painful. Always so guarded, always so careful with what he allows me to feel or see down the connection, Jass isn't quick enough to throw up his walls this time. I feel his rejection as if it were my own. It claws at me with razor sharp teeth, and then it vanishes in a cloud of smoke. Jass steps away from me, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his eyes almost glowing with emotion. We're still in darkness, but I can see him perfectly. His shoulders are tense, his whole demeanor one of retreat, defense and indifference.

"You should probably leave," he tells me. His voice is hushed and gentle, but I hear the warning there, hiding between his words. "I think visiting hours at this particular petting zoo are over."

I place the tips of my fingers against my swollen lips, still reeling, trying to process what's just happened. "You need to wake up, Jass. Your body is dying."

Jass takes a further step away from me, and shadows fall across his face, consuming him. “I’ll wake up when I’m meant to,” he says, as his body disappears. “I’ll wake up when I *have* to. Now go.”



TWENTY-TWO

REZA

CHANCELLOR

Col plucks nervously at the sleeve of his jacket, his eyes sweeping over the people gathered in the Appointments Hall. He's dressed in a beautiful royal blue blazer, shot through with a fine silver pinstripe—quite dashing, and very unlike the dusty browns and beige robes the Pirians wear. His attire sets him apart, which I believe was the point. In between monitoring Jass and helping him through his withdrawal from the Light, Darius has been tirelessly championing Col to the people of the first sector, trying to convince them that he is the right candidate for chancellor. That he is one of them. Col's done nothing of the sort. He's hidden himself away behind closed doors, his mind clearly on other things. He had time to prepare for it, but Erika's

death has still destroyed him all the same. When I've seen him cornered and questioned him at length about how he would run the first sector, Col's answers have been lackluster at best. And tonight, the night of the vote, he has purposefully donned clothes that prove he is not Pirian. It couldn't be clearer that Darius' nomination has been wasted.

"How many of them do you think are out there?" he asks, unfastening the top button of his shirt, then changing his mind and re-buttoning it.

I assess the crowd, trying to gage the number of people who have shown up to vote. "Two thousand? Maybe three?" Only members of the first sector will be able to cast their ballots to select a new chancellor, but there are twice as many Pirians crammed into the Appointments Hall right now. People have come from all over the sub city to witness this strange, unorthodox election. Erika's unexpected death, followed by the nomination of a technical outsider, has clearly peaked the people's interest. The noise levels rise from mildly irritating to an unbearable din, but Col seems to be deaf to it all.

"When are they going to open the proceedings?" he mutters under his breath. "It's time we ended this charade, so we can all get back to the real concern at hand."

"Col—"

He violently shakes his head, tearing open his top button again. “Stryker and his men will be on our doorstep any day now, Reza. My mother predicted it. She said either Jass helped us, or we died at the next eclipse. It doesn’t look like he’ll be signing up to assist us any time soon, and we’re distracting ourselves with elections and voting? The double eclipse is right around the corner. We should be organizing an evacuation or something. We should be reaching out to our allies, seeking shelter from our friends. This is all so fucking pointless.”

“You’ve said it yourself, Col. A seer’s visions can be misinterpreted. And if your mother saw two potential visions of the future, perhaps there’s a third. The Construct might not come here at all. They might—”

Col tenses, his pupils dilating. He’s seen something over my shoulder. I glance behind me, and a broad, muscular Pirian with overly pronounced brow ridges is walking stiffly out onto the dais, followed by two people—a tall woman with quick, black eyes, and an even taller man, his head shaved just like Darius’. When the man leading the group lays eyes on Col, he does very little to hide his disgust. Col pivots, angling his back to the dais, blowing out a shaky breath.

“Who is that?” I whisper.

“Chancellor Farren and his retinue,” Col answers tightly. Where Farren looked clearly

irritated by Col's presence, Col looks riddled with anxiety by the arrival of the other man.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Farren feels we should be arming ourselves and training a military again here on Pirius. And he also feels very strongly that Pirius should be for true Pirians. His daughter and I—” Col doesn’t get to finish his sentence. Farren approaches him, hands concealed in the folds of his pure white dress tunic. He grunts to announce his arrival.

“I’m surprised you even showed up,” Farren says, a sneer twisting his mouth. “There was talk you were going to hide in your quarters for the vote counting. I should have realized you wouldn’t have enough respect for our people to do that.”

Col’s head dips in deference, but even I can tell the gesture is a false one. His eyes glint with hatred as he addresses the third sector’s chancellor. “Once more, I live to disappoint you, Chancellor. I’m only here to observe Pirian tradition. If I win this election, my first order of duty will be to step down and hand the position to someone else. I’m sure that news pleases you.”

Farren rolls his eyes. He runs his tongue over his teeth as he looks over the Appointments Hall, a picture of arrogance and boredom. “Come on, Col. You know as well as I do you won’t be winning this seat. You’ll be able to return to your status quo, running around topside, knocking sand out of your

shoes soon enough. Maybe you'll consider setting up a rusting shack next to your friend's," he says, skating a malevolent glance in my direction.

"Things will be changing down here soon. The Pirian lifestyle might not be for you, now that Erika isn't here to protect you."

Col's smile is saccharine sweet and as sharp-edged as a blade. "I heard," he says, lowering his voice, "that even before the people stopped seeing, you never once had a vision yourself. *That* doesn't sound very Pirian to me."

When I first met Darius, he spent many days explaining the intricacies and politics of Pirius. He told me how revered their visions were, and that a person's first vision after completing their apprenticeships was a right of passage that was highly celebrated. And so, too have *never* had a vision? Farren would be considered half a man if people knew the truth. Less than that, even.

Farren's face turns a ghastly shade of purple. The man and woman he strode over with shoot embarrassed looks to one another, averting their eyes. Raising a finger and thrusting it into Col's face, Farren struggles to get his words out. "You're insolence won't be forgotten, interloper. You'll be lucky if you don't end up dead for what you've done. As soon as all this nonsense is over, I'm going to clean house. Erika had wild, outrageous ideas when it came to maintaining the safety of this

sector, and of our people in general. I *know* who that arrogant upstart you brought into my sector was, and as soon as the rest of the sub city finds out, they're going to string you up and gut you for inviting such danger to their doorstep. I hope you're prepared for *that*."

Farren spins and storms off, nearly knocking a short, motherly looking woman also dressed in a fine, white robe right off the dais and into the crowd. Darius is there to catch hold of her elbow, helping to right her. He sends a withering look after Farren, and then heads in our direction.

"He knows about Jass," Col tells him in hushed tones. "I don't know how he figured it out, but he did. And he's planning on telling everyone here after he wins the sector."

Jass.

At the very mention of his name, a prickly heat rises up my neck; it feels like it's choking me. That kiss was never supposed to happen. And yet, every time I close my eyes, every time the noise in the room falls away and I find myself disappearing into that darkness again, all I can feel are his lips on mine, his warm breath skating over my skin, his hands cupping my face. His tongue, tasting and probing...

"*Reza*." Darius lightly touches my arm, and I snap back inside my own head, the commotion of the Appointments Hall returning to wash over my

like the wave of a tsunami. Col and Darius are both watching me, wearing their concern openly on their faces. “Everything alright?” Col asks.

“Yes, sorry. It’s just...it’s very warm in here.” A poor excuse and I know it. I don’t think I’ve convinced either of them, but they’re both too polite to push me for a further explanation.

Darius looks around to make sure no one is listening to us, and then asks, “Were you able to reach out to Jass earlier? Did he wake up? Farren’s a smug winner and an even sorer loser. It won’t matter what happens here tonight. He *will* tell everyone Jass is here. It would be better if we could secret him out of the sub city before that happens.”

I shake my head. “He said he’d wake up when he had to and not a moment sooner.”

Darius scowls—an expression I don’t think I’ve ever seen him make before. “Stubborn boy. He will have to if a hundred Pirians turn up at my bedroom door with torches and knives, demanding I turn him over.”

“You really think anyone will be brave enough?” Col asks. “Everyone knows what he’s capable of, Darius. It’s more likely everyone will try and flee the sub city to get away from him. That would be a disaster. People would die in the panic.”

“People of Pirius! We are gathered here this evening to announce the new chancellor of the first sector!” a hollow voice booms over the hubbub

filling the appointments room. An almost immediate silence takes effect, and everyone turns to face the dais, waiting expectantly for the very round, very rosy looking seer on the far side of the platform to continue. I hadn't even realized the dais had filled up so much. Col and Darius both look frustrated that their hushed conversation has been cut short, but there's no way for them to continue discussing Jass now, with so many eyes pointed in their direction.

“As you entered the hall, all verified residents of the first sector cast their votes, and we have been diligently tallying the results for the past hour. I am now able to say that the count is complete, and a new chancellor has, indeed, been selected. By a hundred and thirty seven votes, the new chancellor of the first sector is...”

There is no fanfare or drum roll. Only tense silence as the large man in the capacious robes waves his hands in the air with an unnecessary flourish.

“...Chancellor Farren, of the third sector!” he cries.

My heart stumbles to a dead stop in my chest. *What?* Farren? I don't know why, but I assumed, deep down, that Col was going to win. The odds were stacked against him, but he's a good man. Well liked and respected. “I thought Farren couldn't legitimately win?” I hiss to Darius. He

appears as stunned as me, though he's managed to keep his jaw from hanging open.

"He can't," he answers. "At least, he shouldn't be able to. But in this case it looks like the people have spoken. A hundred and thirty seven votes is irrefutable. They want him to be their new leader. I won't be able to put a stop to this."

Farren steps to the front of the dais and holds his arms aloft over his head, grinning down on his new constituents. "This is a momentous day for Pirius. I am honored to be the first chancellor to preside over more than half of the sub city, and I swear to each and every one of you that I will carry out my duties with integrity and dignity, always putting the needs of my people first." He manages a snide sidelong look at Col when he says this. His message is loud and clear: you are not welcome here. You are not one of us.

I hold my breath, waiting for Farren to speak the words that will spell disaster for these people. To tell the assembly that they have had Jass Beylar in their midst for nearly two weeks now. When the Pirians find out, there will be madness and disorder. The exit routes won't be able to accommodate the sheer volume of bodies that try and flow out of them. There will be tunnel collapses. Trampling. Clawing. Death. My mind spins as I try and calculate how we will get out, ourselves. If the exits are blocked by bodies and rock falls, it'll be almost

impossible to make it to the surface. It would be possible to excavate the tunnels, but with so many extra people here in the first sector for the election, would the ventilation shafts be able to cope with the higher demand for oxygen?

I do the math.

I do it again.

The results do not look good.

Col is on tenterhooks, standing beside me. By the looks of things, he's sharing my trepidation, waiting for the axe to fall. Darius is a statue in a black robe, not even blinking, a small, serene smile on his face as he listens to Farren's acceptance speech. I have no idea how he can even think to smile at a time like this. Darius and Erika purposefully sent Col out into the galaxy to find Jass and bring him here. He wouldn't have come if it weren't for me, though. If I didn't exist or I'd died back on the Invictus when it was attacked by those pirates, Jass wouldn't have abandoned his base. There would have been no connection between us driving him to find me. He would have no idea this little colony of people existed in relative harmony on Pirius.

Nausea digs its fingers into my belly. Farren's smug voice echoes loudly inside the hall, and it's all I can do to stop myself from hurling myself at him, to stop him, to shut him up. I'm smaller than him, though, and what would that look like, me attacking

a newly elected official?

It comes to me, as I'm picturing him hurting me, grinding his boot heel into my neck: a thought I shouldn't have. A thought I should abhor and reject immediately, but instead I find myself clinging onto with both hands. I *could* stop him. I wouldn't have to do it with my hands, tackling him and dragging him from the dais. I could slip oh-so-quietly into his mind, and I could prevent him from even forming the words. Better yet, I could remove the knowledge that Jass is even here in at all. Darius said it himself: I have the same capabilities and talents Jass does. The only difference is that he knows how to use those talents, is extremely skilled in utilizing them, and I am not.

Invading someone's mind goes against everything I believe in. If Darius knew what I was considering, it goes without saying that he would be furious with me. I have to do something, though. I have to try.

I reach out with my mind, searching, hunting for a way inside Farren's mind. It feels odd to even be trying such a thing. Odder still when I locate him amongst the crowd of people standing on the dais, and I feel the true levels of spite and hatred pumping out of him, directed at Col. And at *me*.

He doesn't just want us to leave Pirius. He wants us both *dead*. I feel tainted and dirtied by his emotions as I push against the natural wall that

protects his mind and all its secrets. I am gentle, careful, not wanting to alert him to the fact that someone's trying to slip inside his head. Treading lightly, I push and I tease, trying to find a crack in his walls or a way through them.

"...those that would threaten our survival here on Pirius," Farren says. "Those who have not respected the secret nature of our community. But now that we are known once more in the universe, we must take action."

I break through the wall. Thank the gods. Now, to figure out how to remove Jass from Farren's memory. His mind is nothing like Jass'. It felt easy being inside Jass' head. Natural. Like I belonged there. Farren's head is like a maze, with no sense of up or down, left or right. I haven't got the first clue how to proceed. I fumble blindly, hunting for the information I need to steal from the new chancellor of the first sector.

"We mustn't allow ourselves to be erased from the history books, simply because we were too afraid to pick up arms and defend ourselves," he continues. "I intend to strike first against those who would claim our freedom and our lives. I intend to root out our enemies and face them head on! And to that end—" He falters amidst the crowd's cheers and whoops, a deep, unsettled frown carving out a mark between his brows. His dark eyes glaze over, and he takes an unsteady step backward, looking

around the hall.

Shit.

He's discovered me. In the very least, he knows something isn't right. He opens his mouth to speak again, and the bewilderment on his face deepens. I back off, retreating from his memories, but I'm not quick enough. Farren's confusion turns to fury in the flicker of an eye. His head whips around, and for a moment his revulsion lands on Col's shoulders. No more than a stretched out second, though. His focus slides to the left, and I see the instant he realizes what I'm doing. His cheeks redden, his whole body vibrating, and then I am stumbling backward, barely able to keep my footing as Farren forcefully tosses my consciousness out of his head.

Col catches me, wrapping an arm around me to stop me from toppling backward off the dais.
“What the hell?”

Farren is boiling over. He glares at me, his body language promising that the consequences for my actions will be severe indeed. He seems rattled, though. Unsteady on his own feet. He turns back to face the crowd once more, dabbing at the back of his neck with the sleeve of his robe. A strange look passes over him, and the crowd begin to mutter between themselves.

Any second now, he's going to erupt.

Any second now...

His mouth opens and closes a couple of times, but he remains silent.

A minute passes, and then another.

“What’s he doing?” Col hisses.

Farren turns a ghastly shade of white. “I’m... very pleased you’ve placed your trust in me,” he says, clearing his throat. “I promise you faithfully that I won’t let you down. Thank you.”

With one final, disgusted glare in my direction, Farren makes his way down from the dais and walks right into the crowd, shaking hands and slapping people on the back as they all cheer him. Darius sighs, shaking his head. He turns to me, and says quietly, under his breath, “That was ill advised, Reza. You weren’t prepared.”

Col still has his arm around my shoulders. He jostles me, demanding my attention. “What is he talking about? What did you do?”

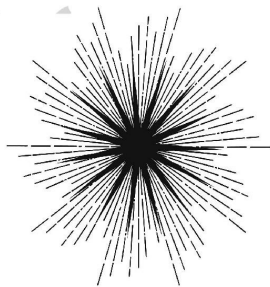
I suppose my actions would be obvious enough to Darius. Farren looked like he’d just been slapped around the face with a wet rag when he detected me. His outrage was palpable, and it was all directed at me. There have been very few times that I’ve felt like I’ve let Darius down, but right now the shame that pulses hot at my temples is making me regret my rashness.

“I tried to hide Jass from Farren.” I bow my head, burning holes into the tops of my dusty, sandblasted boots. “I tried to remove the memory

of him from his head, but I couldn't find it. I was clumsy. It was foolish to—”

Col's face has blanched. His hands shake as he pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger, groaning under his breath. “Gods. You can do that stuff too?”

“Not yet, apparently,” Darius says dryly. “The skill it takes to accomplish such a task is far beyond you at the moment, Reza. You're a child, trying to sprint before it can even roll onto its stomach. And you might have just ruined any chance we might have had at saving this planet.”



TWENTY-THREE

JASS

STOLEN FRUIT

I told Reza I'd wake up when I had to and not a moment sooner, but as soon as I sensed she had left Darius' chambers, I dragged myself back into the realm of the living, kicking and screaming.

Returning to my body, allowing myself to feel the ache and the burn, the echo of my cells still calling out for the Light, was brutal. But not unbearable.

Opening my eyes was the hardest part. Once I'd achieved that, blinking against the stark storm light hanging from the wall beside my cot until my eyes remembered how to work, it was a relatively simple process. Fingers. Hands. Arms. Neck. Toes. Feet. Legs. Torso. I stretched out every part of me, and then I sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

Sore. Everything hurt. My bones felt like they

were cast out of iron, and my head was pounding, but I was awake. It might have been less painful if I'd waited a little longer, but I couldn't remain there inside my own head, restless in the dark, remembering what it felt like to wrap my arms around her and kiss her.

It was torturous. Far worse than any physical pain my body could offer me. Not because I didn't want to kiss her and I resented the fact that it happened. But because she had pulled away. I saw the look in her eyes when she shoved me away from her: anger, disappointment, and fear, all rolled into one.

This isn't how I imagined any of this going. I was going to come here, take her, and then find a quiet corner of the galaxy to figure out what to do next.

Instead I find myself buried thirty feet under ground, trapped and manipulated, forced to wait and to obey, and now...forced to acknowledge my feelings for her. Feelings I never even wanted in the first place. I told Reza the truth. I can't kill her. It really would be easier for me to end my own life than to end hers, which infuriates me. Compassion is weakness. Affection is weakness. Love is weakness. Addiction is weakness. Thanks to Darius, I don't feel like I'm going to die without the Construct's Light anymore, but I've replaced that craving with one even stronger. Even more deadly.

Reza is a far more potent high than Light could ever be. Light merely kindled a flame inside my body. Reza has the potential to set the fractured, charred remains of my very soul on fire.

I consider trashing Darius' quarters and breaking every stick of furniture he owns as punishment for his interference, but then I reject the idea. It would serve no real purpose, and I find I'm thirstier than I have ever been in my life. My clothes are neatly folded on a small, rough-hewn table on the other side of Darius' room. I remove the loose black shirt and pants I'm wearing that must belong to Darius, and I get changed quickly. I have no idea where in the sub city I am, but I manage to find my way to a canteen, which turns out to be deserted. No one behind the serving hatch. No one taking payment. No one sitting down to eat. I help myself to food and water, and I finish both on my way back to the small room Col set me up in when I first arrived here.

I pass a handful of people, but the tunnel system has a weird, abandoned quality to it, like the old chapel back on the base.

This all feels very strange.

On The Nexus, I walk down hallways and corridors and people quail. They turn and walk the other way in a hurry. When I enter a room, all conversation stops, and all eyes avert to the floor. Here, when I walk through the tunnels, people still

stare at me. They do it openly, though, despite the discomfort studying me for too long might cause them, as they marvel at such an oddity as an off-worlder wandering about on his own, without an apparent care in the world. I am a novelty. An intrigue. I am simply different, and that makes me interesting. On The Nexus, I'm the stuff of people's nightmares made flesh. Here, I am just a man wearing borrowed clothes, eating stolen fruit and drinking stolen water.

I can feel Reza somewhere on the other side of the sector. She's getting much better at shielding herself from me, so I can't really tell what she's feeling or thinking. I can imagine perfectly well, though. She hates herself. She hates me. She hates the Construct, and she hates the position she finds herself in.

She's filled with so much hate sometimes, and yet she claims *I* am the one consumed by dark emotions.

In the small bathroom attached to my room, I shower and I shave. I'm beginning to feel much better than I did. I stretch out my body again, testing for weaknesses or any hidden injuries, and when I've ascertained that there are none, I drop down to the ground and I complete a set of push-ups. A hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred. A thousand. Sit ups next. I don't even bother to count. I do them until my stomach burns and I can't

physically lift my body up one more time.

Hours have passed since I left Darius' quarters and no one has arrived, out of breath, relieved to find that I haven't left a trail of bodies in my wake.

I pace up and down like a caged animal for a further hour, and then I make a decision. Enough is enough. I won't do this anymore. I will not bow down to these Pirian people and their ridiculous demands. I won't stay my hand based on the weak threat that Reza will kill herself. I've wasted enough time here, and I've wasted enough energy letting Reza have her own way.

I leave my room, and I pull on the tether, using it to gage exactly where Reza is. Due north. Not that far anymore. And I sense confusion in her—a heightened emotional state that wasn't there before. I don't think she's in danger, but she certainly seems distressed. My feet propel me forward before I even know what's happening. Soon, the tunnels begin to fill up with people, and I find myself being drawn back to the Appointments Hall. I take hold of the nearest seer, ignoring the way he pulls back from me.

“What's happening?” I demand.

“The vote's about to be announced. The collectors are counting up the ballots.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he's talking about. Then I remember: Erika Pakka, dead. Col, nominated for chancellor. I keep forgetting a

whole week has passed. It feels like I was just standing here inside the hall with Reza only a couple of hours ago. I've been languishing in withdrawal hell, though. Everyone else has been moving on with their lives, preparing for change. If only they knew what will befall them all soon. They wouldn't be concerning themselves with this kind of crap.

I release the seer, pushing my way through the crowd. Over my shoulder to my left, I can feel Reza. She's like the sun, casting her light and heat over me. It's really the only thing I can feel anymore. When we're in such close proximity, she fills my head in the most intoxicating way. She doesn't know how her energy affects me. If she did, she'd be using the knowledge to her advantage, I'm sure. The iron grip I maintain on my own energy is taking more and more effort to maintain. It seems as though I'm slipping through the cracks, and I can't stop it, no matter how hard I try. I renew my efforts right now, though, strengthening the barriers inside my mind, reinforcing them with everything I've got. I don't want her to know I'm here.

Once I'm standing in the middle of the crowd, I finally allow myself to look up at the dais. Reza stands in between Col and Darius, talking with the two of them, and my rib cage tightens. Her dark hair is down for once, released from its intricate

braids and plaits. Beautiful. Highlights of blonde and caramel catch under the light whenever she turns her head. Her features are fine and delicate. Reza has always felt like a figment of my imagination, a mirror or an echo of feeling that only I can see or hear, so actually *seeing* her, standing in front of her, being able to reach out and touch her...it doesn't seem real half the time.

She scowls, and I wonder what's troubling her. Col looks murderous, and Darius...Darius just looks perturbed. I soon piece together the awkward tension in the room, though. On the far side of the dais, the chancellor of the third sector stands with two lanky bodyguards, whispering so hard that the flesh of his cheeks is visibly shaking. Farren. I believe his name was Farren. Moments later, a squat, peculiar looking Pirian plants himself at the front of the dais and begins to yell out in a hoarse voice, struggling to make himself heard over the melee of the crowd that surrounds me.

"People of Pirius! We are gathered here this evening to announce the new chancellor of the first sector!" Anticipation ripples through the hall, and I can hear so many thoughts rising up toward the high ceilings.

Col Pakka is the only viable option.

Col will defend us.

Farren is the right choice.

Farren will win.

Col will win.

*Col deserves to follow in his mother's
footsteps.*

Col...

Col...

Col...

There are two other Pirians standing up there on the dais, a very large woman wearing a benevolent smile, and a sturdy, nervous looking elderly man who side steps from one foot to the other, chewing on his bottom lip. They're obviously also contenders in the running for chancellor of the first sector, but I don't hear their names on anyone's thoughts. There seems to be an even divide between Col and Farren.

"As you entered the hall, all verified residents of the first sector cast their votes, and we have been diligently tallying the results for the past hour. I am now able to say that the count is complete, and a new chancellor has, indeed, been selected. By a hundred and thirty seven votes, the new chancellor of the first sector is..."

I sense six strong voices, all echoing the same name on the other side of the Appointments Hall. Each and every one of them says Col Pakka, as if they're prompting the announcer on the dais to get on with it and complete his sentence.

When the fat little seer finally quits his fanfare and speaks the winner's name, though, it comes out

entirely different. “Chancellor Farren, of the third sector!”

A ripple of shock travels through the hall, six streams of surprise almost strong enough to color the air a vibrant shade of green. I’m assuming these six Pirians were the ballot counters, and the seer making the announcements has just declared the runner up as victor. Reza’s horror is there for all to see, painted all over her beautiful face.

I watch as she attempts to conceal her dismay, but she fails to do a very convincing job. Darius looks stricken. And Col? The only word to describe the energy rising from Col right now is relief.

Farren steps to the front of the dais to accept his new role, and the crowd cheers. There are plenty of Pirians who turn their backs and push their way out of the hall, their worry and suspicion turning the air sour. I don’t listen to Farren. I focus on Reza, savoring the gambit of emotions that spill out of her. She’s anxious. More than anxious. She’s terrified. Her walls are completely down for a second, and I see her thoughts with crystal clarity. She’s worried about the people of Pirian. She’s worried there will be panic and death. She’s worried about...*me*.

She keeps sidestepping it, dancing around it, avoiding the thought at all costs, but I can feel it there within her head. Her plan takes shape inside my head just as it forms inside her own. She’s going

to try and sneak into Farren's mind. She's going to try and steal one of his memories.

How very *me* of her.

I could intervene. I could reach into the smug, arrogant bastard's head myself and scoop out whatever it is Reza is looking for, but that would be no fun. I'm curious. Will she actually get her hands dirty? Will perfect little Reza, with all of her scruples and morals, carry out a task that she considers wrong in order to protect *me*?

This should be interesting.

I fold my arms across my body, and I wait. I sense Reza's panic when she tries to slip inside Farren's head and she encounters her first blockade. Then, her sense of victory when she breaks through. Then, her confusion when she realizes she doesn't know how to proceed. Hunting down and weeding out a single memory inside someone's mind is difficult. It took me cycles to be able to finesse that skill, and even now I don't really bother working to such infinitely small parameters. If I need a person to forget something, I make them forget everything. That's the only way to guarantee the process will work.

Reza fumbles around inside Farren's head, essentially tripping all over the furniture, and that's when Farren senses her. He's not the most sensitive seer I've come across—his mind is relatively stunted in comparison to some people here on

Pirius—but he knows something’s up.

Reza nearly falls backward, and Col catches her, wrapping an arm around her in order to keep her on her feet. An insidious fog gathers inside my own head, twisting my thoughts for a second. *Col shouldn’t be touching her that way. He shouldn’t have his arm around her shoulders. If anyone should be breaking her fall, it should be me.*

As soon as I think this, a quiet, timid voice in the back of my head whispers something I don’t particularly want to hear: *You are the very reason she will fall.*

A loud buzzing fills my ears. I don’t hear or see anything for a moment. Col’s arm, holding Reza tightly, has consumed my mind, and nothing else seems to register. She doesn’t shrug away from his embrace. She doesn’t push him away, the way she pushed me away earlier. She just stands there, panting, her cheeks flushed with color, staring at Farren while the hideous piece of shit stares right back at her. He looks like he’s going to hurt her. He looks like he’s going to fucking kill her. Resolve pours off him in waves. As chancellor of the sector, he can have her cast out. Banished. He wants to make her suffer for trying to invade his mind, though. He wants to make her pay before sending her out to die of thirst on the surface.

I react. I don’t even need to think about it. I barge my way into Farren’s head, and the action is

as simple as opening up a door. I step inside, and Farren's fear swamps me. I've done nothing to disguise my presence. I've done nothing to camouflage myself. I want him to know I'm inside his head, and I want him to understand what that means. I can end his life right now if I want to. I can command him to take one of the phase rifles he has hidden under his ridiculous robe, and I can make him shoot himself with the head with it. I could make it even easier than that, though. I could force him to just stop breathing and he would suffocate in front of everyone. They wouldn't be able to save him. They wouldn't be able to push the oxygen into his lungs if I didn't allow it.

Farren writhes and squirms like a worm on a hook, desperately trying to eject me from his head, the same way he just ejected Reza. He has no idea who he's dealing with, though. I see inside his thoughts, and I witness all of his secrets. He's petrified of me. He damn well should be.

"I'll be the harbinger of your destruction," I speak into his mind. "I will close my fist around your fragile heart and cease it from beating. If you so much as look at her again, so much as think about her, I will make sure you never draw another breath, Waylen Farren. I will make your death my most cherished accomplishment. I'll cleave your head from your shoulders, and I will mount the damn thing on my wall for target practice. Your

family will know no peace. Your friends will beg for death before I am finished with them. Do you hear me? Do you understand me?"

Farren's lips don't move, but he replies immediately inside his head. *"Yes! Gods, I hear you! Yes, I understand!"*

"Good. Now leave, before my mercy finds its limit."

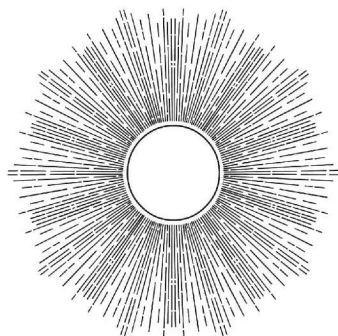
Farren mumbles a few words to the crowd, his face turning purple with rage, and then he descends from the dais, spitting mad but doing his best to look pleased as people congratulate him on his victory. He heads right for me, and when our eyes meet I recognize the look of defiance I see there. Farren may have just told me he understood me, but I know men like him. He'll return to the dark, cramped hole he calls home, and he will sit there and stew. His pride will convince him that he is stronger than me, that he can outwit me somehow, that he'll be able to take care of me, if only he just stands up and takes action.

And then he will die.

He'll have to die anyway, because the truth of the matter and the one thing he should really know about me is that I *have* no mercy. I cut through the crowd, watching Farren flee, feeling pretty good about myself.

I'm about to leave, when I snag on something, like tripping over a rock in a road. A secret, dark

and nasty, burning at the forefront of someone's mind.



TWENTY-FOUR

REZA

A KNIFE'S EDGE

I dream of mechanized animals with fluffy, organic, wiry coats, leaping over fences. A weird dream. I wake up, covered in sweat, my heart beating too slowly, my lungs refusing to inflate, and I have to get up and walk around my quarters to try and calm the panic that hits me.

I can feel that *he* is awake. It's a strange sensation, being able to tell when another person's mind is active. When Jass succumbed to the sleep state Darius induced, I barely detected him at all. It was as though his conscious has slipped away and he had traveled somewhere I was unable to follow. Now, I can feel him, like a hand on my shoulder, a weight, a presence that I am reluctant to admit is a

becoming more than a little reassuring. He must have decided now was a good time to return to us. If he's still in Dari—

“What are you doing?” The words are marred, slightly distorted, but I hear them perfectly well inside my head. My heart damn near explodes out of my ribcage from the shock of a very real, very close voice speaking to me this way.

“Jass! Out. Get out of my head!”

“Is that what Farren said when you tried to lobotomize him earlier?” I can hear the smirk in his deep, rumbling voice.

“Darius shouldn't have told you about that.”

“He didn't. I watched it all happen with my own two eyes. I need you to come with me, Reza.”

“Where?”

“Off-planet. To a base on the other side of the system.”

“A Construct base?”

He pauses. My heart beats a handful of times while I wait for him to answer me, but it feels like a lifetime. “Yes,” he says stiffly. Nothing more. No further explanation. No wheedling to try and make me see his request from his point of view. I can't help but laugh.

“You seriously think I'd ever *willingly* go to a Construct base? I need sleep, Jass. Please...don't do this again. It's bad enough that I can feel your restlessness without you striking up conversations

with me against my will.”

“You’re just as restless as I am. You can feel it, too. Death hangs over this planet. It’ll cloak it like a shroud, blotting out the suns, and then it’ll be too late.”

My hand reflexively moves to the base of my throat. “Too late to save everyone?”

“Too late to save yourself. Everyone on Pirius is going to die. You can’t change that. If Stryker and his men arrive and find you here, they won’t hesitate. They’ll take you. They’ll torture you, just like they tortured me. If you come with me now, I’ll be able to protect you. I’ll be in charge of your reinsertion into the Construct. I’ll be able to make sure you’re *safe*, Reza.”

There’s a pleading quality to his voice that makes my breath quicken. His words are just as cold as they ever were, but I can feel how badly he wants me to listen to him. He’s urging me through the connection, trying to impress upon me the danger that approaches, as if I am completely ignorant to it. I am all too aware of the peril we’re all in, I tried to convince *him* of it earlier, but if he thinks I will just leave Pirius and forsake everyone living beneath the surface of this planet, he has another thing coming.

“You know what my answer is, Jass. You *know* it already, which is why you didn’t even bother showing up at my door to ask it. You knew it would

be a complete waste of time.”

He doesn't reply. The connection falls dead, like a damaged coms radio, blasting nothing but quiet static through its speakers. I exhale, sinking down to sit on my bed. Thank the gods for that. I don't want to argue with him. It would be exhausting. The last thing I need after my run-in with Farren. It took me hours to fall asleep earlier, as I lay there under the covers, waiting for one of the chancellor's men to burst through the door and murder me. Now I know how desperate Jass believes the situation with the Construct to be, I won't be able to sleep for an entire week. Fuck. Without their ability to analyze their visions, the Pirians are never going to leave their home. They'll remain here and burn because they are too stubborn and too scared to risk running out in the open in order to reach safety. I can warn them and so can Darius and Col, but until the Construct ships breach the atmosphere and are hovering directly over the sub city, nothing I say will change their minds or stir them into action. They'll be—

Rap, rap, rap.

I freeze. The gentle knocking was quiet, but it might as well have been a series of deafening explosions. I know who it is. I can feel him standing out there in the hallway. Waiting.

I get to my feet and move to stand by the door. Reaching out, I allow the palm of my hand to hover

an inch above the surface of the wood. Closing my eyes, I hang my head, breathing deeply. “You’re not supposed to be here,” I whisper. “Go back to your room.”

“I won’t.” His answer comes to my in my head. It’s soft. A gentle caress that reminds me of his hands stroking my face as he kissed me. “You challenged me. Just now, you told me coming to you would be a complete waste of time. You know it isn’t, though. You know you want me to come inside.”

“I do not.”

“*False.*” He speaks the word out loud this time. I can hear the amusement in his voice through the door.

“It’s the middle of the night, Jass. We can have another session tomorrow. You can talk to me then. Ask me anything you want to.”

“I don’t need to ask you anything else,” he says. “I already know everything about you. And you know everything about me. Open the door, Reza.”

“No.”

“I could open it myself.”

“But you won’t.”

“You sound very sure.”

I don’t like the reckless edge to his voice. I know very well he’ll open this door if he wants to. I won’t be able to stop him. I’m filled with alarm, but

it fades and vanishes just as quickly as it came. What will happen if he breaks his way in here? Will he try and make me leave Pirius under the cover of darkness, regardless of the fact that I told him I wouldn't? There's every chance he might. I growl, unlocking the door and flinging it open, ready to fight. Better I face him this way, instead of allowing him the pleasure of entering against my will.

He stands there, wearing a pair of loose black pants and nothing else. His chest is bare. His feet are bare. His hair is rumpled, curling everywhere in a shock of dark waves that frame his face in the most fascinating, distracting way. The tunnel outside my room is narrower than most of the sub city access routes, which means he's standing that much closer to the door. That much closer to me.

"I wouldn't have broken it," he says, sliding past me, entering my room. "I would have just unlocked it. You don't need to look so indignant."

"Please. Why don't you come on in?" I close the door, regretting the decision immediately, but I don't want to open it again. Opening it will only display fear, and I've given him the satisfaction of frightening me thousand times already. I won't be handing my emotions over so easily anymore. Not if I can help it.

Jass has no right being crammed into such a small space. He towers over me, the crown of his head almost touching the ceiling, and I'm dwarfed

by him even more than usual. I turned the light on beside my bed earlier; the soft, subdued light pours over Jass' shoulders and down his right arm like honey, turning his pale skin to gold. I don't look at his chest. I don't look at the beautifully carved muscle, or the defined lines that mark out each of his abs. I don't look at the broad sweep of his shoulders, or the pronounced shape of his collarbone. I definitely don't look at the way his pants hang low on his hips, displaying a deep vee that disappears below the waist of the thin black material. Jass sweeps his hand back through his hair, pressing his lips together in a boyish way that makes me want—*need*—to stop looking at him altogether.

“You came half naked on purpose.” This is a statement. A fact. He made a decision when he left his room not to put clothes on, and that means something. Jass leans back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. The man looks damned good in the plain black shirts he's been wearing, but he's something else without them. His arms are corded and powerful—muscle knitted around even more muscle. He would probably be a formidable foe even if he didn't possess the ability to control people's thoughts and actions. Just like his mind, Jass' body is a weapon, and it looks like it's been kept in excellent condition.

“You told me to come, so I came,” he says

simply. “I didn’t realize a shirt or a pair of boots were going to make a difference to our conversation.”

“It would have made it easier to look at you while I refused your insane request,” I counter.

“Look at me now, Reza.” His voice is low and hushed. Haunting, in a way. I close my eyes instead of lifting my head. I will *not* give him what he wants. “Reza. It’s *never* going to be easy for you to look at me. Looking at me makes you feel alive. Looking at me makes you *want*. Looking at me makes you need. So just fucking do it. Look at me. Look at me right now, the way I’m looking at *you*.”

I’ve forgotten that I’m wearing nothing but a training vest and my underwear. I was so concerned with him showing up here half naked that my own attire completely escaped me. Now I don’t know which one of us is more underdressed, him or me. I sigh, raising my head, raising my gaze, until I’m looking him in the eye. There’s a hunger in his eyes, just as dangerous and sharp as my own. My skin flushes at the very sight of it.

“You’re never going to convince me to leave these people to die,” I whisper.

“You’re never going to convince me that you don’t think it would be easier if we did.”

“Easier doesn’t mean right, Jass. It never has.”

He pushes away from the wall, slowly moving toward me. Just like inside his head when he kissed

me earlier, he makes sure I can see him coming. And just like before, I do nothing to stop him. Heat radiates from his body, and I can almost feel his skin beneath my fingertips, smooth and hard. Jass reaches out for me and for a brief, drawn out moment, his hand doesn't touch mine. He looks down at it, a curious expression on his face, as if he doesn't really know if he's going to do it or not. He blinks once, twice, three times, and then closes his fingers around my wrist, lifting it up, inspecting it in the oddest way. He turns my hand over. Says nothing as he studies my palm, his eyes following the lines that crisscross and intersect there. We've been here before. In the dreamscapes he's constructed, I've touched him and allowed myself to be touched. I've wanted and allowed far more than that. This is real, though. In the flesh.

“Jass—”

He places my hand on his chest, closing his eyes, and my words die on my lips. He's real. His skin is hot to the touch and just as I imagined it would be: firm, solid, and well defined. His breath hitches in the back of his throat as I press the tips of my fingers into his pec. I can feel his heart beating wildly beneath my hand—a frantic, erratic beat, completely at odds with his otherwise very still, very contained demeanor. So unexpected. So human.

It's wrong, but I want to fall into him. I want to

be swept away in his arms. I want to fall, knowing he has hold of me and that he will protect me. How can I trust him to do that, though? He wants to take me back to the Construct. He wants me to bend the knee to him, to swear him a fealty I do not owe him. One I will never be able to give. I look up at him and the small room I've called home for a couple of weeks now tilts uneasily. His eyes are still closed, which seems like an offering in a way. He makes himself vulnerable by closing his eyes. We both know he doesn't need his vision to know if I'm planning on attacking him or trying to kill him, but still...it's an offering all the same. His jaw clenches, and he breathes out down his nose—more of a sigh than anything else. “*This* is easy,” he says quietly. “*This* is right.”

I have a thousand things to say. I have a thousand reasons why this is *not* easy and *not* right, but my tongue's tied itself in knots, refusing to let me speak. Jass places his hand on top of mine, pressing my palm down so that there's no way for me to retreat...and I don't even try. His breathing is growing more uneven by the second. Or mine is. I can't tell.

“We're balanced on two sides of a knife edge,” Jass whispers. “We're answers to a question that was posed a long time ago. We're the *same* answer, Reza.”

I close my eyes, too, unable to stand the

electricity that's firing between us any more. "But what is the question?" I ask. I'm breathless, my words barely louder than the rustling of cloth.

"You know. You've always known." Jass removes his hand from over mine, slowly taking hold of me by the hips. He guides my body forward, and suddenly there is no space between us. His bare chest is pressed up against me, and I feel the maddening perfection of his skin through the material of my training vest. My nipples are peaked and tight already, my breasts heavy. I'm so dizzy. I can't seem to make my legs hold the rest of me up properly. It's a battle, but I remain standing.

How many women has he been with on The Nexus? The only two people more powerful than Jass on that base were Regis and Stryker, and the whole fleet knew about the line of women disappearing in and out of *their* sleeping chambers every night. He may have had me while we were unconscious, but what about while he was awake? It's ludicrous, but I find myself caring about the number of notches on Jass' bedpost. Those damn posts have probably been whittled down to toothpicks by now. His hands slip around my back, and down, down, until he's gripping hold of my ass. Our connection pulses, a thread of white light burning hotter and hotter inside me, and a euphoric wave surges through me. This is different. This never happened before. Jass must feel what I'm

feeling. His head rocks back, and a strained gasp escapes past his lips.

When he allows his head to drop, his eyes are no longer closed. They're open, and they are almost totally consumed by the gold flecks that usually rim his irises. He's a ruthless, unknowable man, and yet when I look at him right now, so much fire in his eyes, I feel like I *do* know him. The sensation is more uncanny than anything I have ever experienced before. It's *more* than knowing him. I am a part of him, and he is a part of me.

I hate the sensation, and I'm addicted to it. I never knew a person could be so conflicted. Being with Jass is like drowning and floating off into oblivion all at once. It's burning up and freezing. I can't wrap my head around it. I know I shouldn't want him, but every cell in my body screams otherwise. It demands his hands on my body. It demands his lips parting mine.

Jass' hair tumbles into my face as he leans down to kiss me, and my heart races away from me. He's turned on. I can feel just how turned on he is as he leans his body into mine, huffing out a pained breath against my mouth.

Gods...

Is this really happening? How can I be so reckless? How can I be allowing this? It feels as though we've been working our way towards this for a very long time, both of us tumbling, headlong,

blindly toward this inevitability ever since Jass stepped foot onto the Invictus. In every possible reality, in every possible universe, Jass and I end up here. Together. Joined by this tie that refuses to let either of us go. I know it without a shadow of a doubt. I'm sure Jass does, too.

When his mouth meets mine, the tether sends a bone shattering pulse of energy through me—more forceful and demanding than ever before. I can barely breathe as Jass parts my lips and opens my mouth, stroking my tongue with his own. His fingers dig into my skin, his shoulders shaking; the tether must be sending the same amount of energy into him, too. He's always so composed. So stoic and unreadable. He'd never allow anyone to see him so affected by something unless it was completely unavoidable.

He rests his forehead against mine, briefly closing his eyes again, as if he's at war within himself. And then it's as if something inside him snaps. His caution disappears. His slow, gentle movements vanish, and a desperate, frantic need takes their place. In one swift, rough act, Jass sweeps me off the floor, lifting me into his arms, and he pins me against the wall. The wind is knocked out of me for a second, but I barely notice. He's a man possessed. He kisses me with a furious abandon that scares and thrills me in equal parts. My body cries out for more. I gather handfuls of his

hair as he works his mouth over mine, making demands of me that I never considered possible before.

I will never bend to Jass' will, and he will never bend to mine. This, somehow, is where we meet in the middle, and I'm damned if the compromise isn't the headiest, most addictive thing in the galaxy.

"I'm going to take you," Jass growls into my ear. "I'm going to have you, Reza. I won't allow anyone else to touch you. To look at you. To claim you. I'll fucking *kill* anyone who tries." His mouth is on my neck, then. Teeth grazing my collarbone. His tongue laving at the hollow of my throat. My head tips back, and the frustrated sigh I let out surprises me—relief and need, woven so tightly together.

Through the haze that's clouding my head, I manage to find a kernel of common sense. "We should stop," I pant. "This...this is—"

"If you say this is wrong," Jass snarls, "I will put you down and walk out of this room, and I will *not* come back. This is *not* wrong. This is what we were made for, Reza."

I close my mouth, my protest fading and dying. If he were to put me down and leave right now...I can't even contemplate what that would do to me. The seed of doubt that caused me to speak out in the first place is still there, but it silences itself.

"Tell me you don't want me to leave, Reza,"

Jass whispers. He strokes the right side of my face with the tips of his fingers, his unusual, beautiful eyes searching my face. “Tell me you want this. Tell me you want *me*.”

Those words are inflammatory. I know the consequences of such an admission. There will be no turning away from it. No going back. It’d be unwise to give Jass the confession he’s pleading for without analyzing all of this a little closer. My heart wants to give him what he wants, but my head’s all over the place.

“*Reza*,” Jass groans. “Stop fighting me. Stop fighting *this*. Put everything else aside for two moments. Put aside the Construct. Put aside the Pirians. Put aside the past, and the future, and everything else in between. Be here with me, right now, in this moment. Tell me the truth.” His hands roam downward, over my chest. My training vest is thin and barely covers my stomach. The moment Jass’ hands reaches my naked skin, I lose all ability to think straight. The tether pulls taut, more energy and pleasure flooding me, and I hiss under my breath.

“I want you to stay,” I grind out through my clenched teeth. “I...I *do* want you, Jass.”

“That’s all I fucking needed.” He’s holding me one moment, trapping me between his body and the wall behind me, and then the next I am traveling through the air, away from him, hurtling toward the

bed. I land on my back, my arms and legs spread wide, held in place, not by Jass himself but by some invisible force. I strain against the pressure, but I can't move an inch. Jass slowly walks toward the bed, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He is a dark prince. A man of shadow and darkness. I can see something else in him, though. The potential for more. Darius' hope that Jass will turn into a different person altogether now that he is no longer addicted to the Light is wishful thinking. I *know* that. But as he reaches the bed and looks down at me, there's more than simple lust in his eyes. There is the beginning of something akin to love, and any creature who is capable of feeling love is capable of good.

"You could probably break free if you tried," he says softly.

"Probably," I answer. I'm not so sure, though. I'm not as strong as Jass. Not yet, anyway. There may come a day when I'll be his equal, but it's hard to picture. In any case, he's correct. I'm not fighting him right now. I'm letting him hold me down with his mind, allowing myself to be vulnerable, and it's the most terrifying thing I've ever done. "I'm choosing," I whisper. "I'm making the decision to trust you."

Jass' mouth lifts into a dangerous smirk, but I can see the surprise he's trying to hide. He wasn't expecting *trust* from me. "Let's hope you don't

regret it,” he says. He falls onto me on top of the bed, and it’s all I can do to stop myself from crying out. My training vest tears down the middle, the fabric rent in two beneath Jass’ urgent hands. He halts, then, looking down at me, his eyes feasting on my naked breasts.

I want to hide and cover myself up, but it’s impossible with my wrists still pinned to the bed. Jass brackets my body with his arms, holding himself up. He leans over me, and he fastens my left nipple in between his teeth. An explosion of pain and pleasure goes off in my head, and my spine arches away from the cot. Jass shudders, as if he feels what I’m feeling, too.

“*Shit...*” he hisses. “I tried not to want you. I tried to douse this fire before it could take hold of me. I couldn’t do it, Reza. You commanded my attention from the other side of the galaxy. And now that I’m here with you...” He shakes his head, like he’s struggling to form a coherent thought. “Nothing else seems to matter anymore.”

I know how he’s feeling. I’m struggling for air. I can’t fill my lungs properly. My body’s working in overdrive, battling to keep up with what’s happening. Jass’ hips angle down; he grinds himself against me, between my legs, and my vision dims. Is this how it is for all people who share a connection? Is this what it feels like for all people who are fiercely attracted to one another? Or is our

tether intensifying the experience one hundred fold?

Jass slides his hand between our bodies, and a rush of pure ecstasy begins to burn at the apex of my legs. He rubs and he strokes at me, kissing me at the same time, and the assault of energy and pleasure is almost too much to bear. I'm panting and writhing all over the bed by the time Jass puts me out of my misery and slides my underwear down off my hips, then from my body completely.

Rocking back, he sits on his heels, his eyes roaming up and down my naked form like a starving man, about to enjoy his first meal in cycles. "You're perfection," he murmurs. "I've never seen anyone like you before, Reza. I've travelled all over the galaxy. I've seen every life form that's ever existed, and nothing and no one has ever compared to you." Moving quickly, he slides his pants down his body, stepping out of them, and then he's standing in front of me, just as naked as I am. He is raw, though. Fearsome to behold. His body would make a maestro weep. They wouldn't be able to capture his beauty with paint, ink, clay or stone. Any artist would abandon their craft and forever mourn the loss of it, because they'd know how impossible it would be to do this man justice.

"Are you afraid?" he asks.

I was never afraid in the dreamscape. This is a

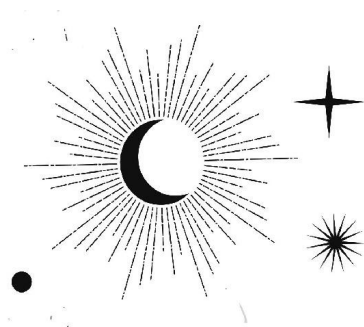
thousand times more intense than that ever was, though. I think. I search my soul, and I'm shocked by the answer to his question. "No. I'm not afraid of you. Not anymore."

Jass runs his hands up the insides of my thighs, and I shudder when they meet between my legs. He growls, a low rumble that sounds like it's worked its way up from the very bottom of his diaphragm. "I dreamed of you when I was a child," he tells me. "I dreamed of you when I began to grow into a man. I dreamed of you before I knew the sea of stars that house the heavens. I dream of you when I close my eyes, and I dream of you when they're open. The days pass and nothing remains constant, Reza. *You* are my only constant. I move through this life without ever caring which direction I'm heading in, so long as it's toward you."

I am scared of his words. They are mirrors of the truth that lives inside me, and has always lived inside me. I've run and I've hidden, and I've tried to convince myself that I'm actually living, that I actually have a choice in where fate leads me, but I've always known it's not true. Every moment of my life, every second I've spent training, or eating, or learning, or fighting... every single one of those moments has been leading me here. To him.

"I can't love you," I whisper, closing my eyes. "I can never love you. Not if this is who you truly are."

Jass dips down between my legs, his eyes flashing brighter than both Piriuss' suns combined. He looks sad when he speaks. "Do you really think either of us have a choice?"



TWENTY-FIVE

JASS

EVERYTHING

I want to be everything she needs. I want to be everything she desires. I want to be more important to her than the air she breathes and the warmth on her skin. Now *I* want too much.

In the dark, Reza lies unconscious, her head resting on my chest. A show of trust. I want to be worthy of that trust, but I can't see how that will ever come to pass. Her hair is a tangle of spun fibers, the darkest brown to the purest gold, and I can't stop myself from stroking my fingers over it as she sleeps. My hands know her body intimately. Touching her, exploring the lines and curves of her, was a brand new experience in a universe where nothing feels new to me anymore. However, there is a part of me that has always known the shape of

her, and memorized her strength and her fragility before the very first sparks of life stirred out there in the pitch-black hollow of space.

There's one question burning in my mind as I lay absolutely still, listening to the soft pull and draw of her even breathing: Is this real? Do I *really* feel this way about her? If this thing, this connection, has been a part of me since before I can remember, how can this tangle of emotion I feel for Reza be genuine? Is it just providence? Have we already lived a thousand lifetimes, always had this same connection, drawn to one another over and over again, only to meet and fall in love each time? If so, then is this connection the *only* reason I feel so strongly right now? Is the tether something I can put aside and forsake, because it weakens me and makes me act so damn rashly?

Reza has asked herself these same questions. I've felt them eating away at her. I'm sure she's come to the conclusion that her heart is not the architect of this mess, but her very cells, programmed and designed to seek me out, no matter where or *who* I am.

She said she can't love me, but I know that isn't true. I feel it when I kiss her. I felt it when I was inside her and she was wrapped around me, clinging to me, praying into my ear for more of me. The connection between us fused our souls together, and forged us into one all-powerful, living,

breathing thing. I was her, and she was me in that moment. I saw everything we were, we are, and everything we will be. It nearly brought me to my knees.

Ever since the Construct began my training, I have been their creature. I've done as I was told, and I've turned myself inside out for them, to the point where their approval was all that mattered. When I pushed inside Reza, her eyes burning into me, her fingernails digging into my back, all that changed. She has no idea the power she holds over me. I'm *her* creature now. Her slave. Fuck going back to the Construct. Her approval is the only thing that will motivate me from here on out, and I have no idea how to even form the words to let her know.

Would she want me to say those things to her?

Does she even see a way forward for us?

Will the Construct find and kill us before we get a chance to figure these things out?

I'm so used to regulation and routine. I'm so used to following the Construct's edict, everything being laid out before me so simply, that the confusion that comes with all of these questions is hard to process.

Unlike in my room, Reza's quarters come complete with a tiny window that sits high on the wall above her bed. The tiny snap shot of night sky visible through the sand-scuffed glass is hazy, but I

can see a single bright star out there, floating in the sky. There might be planets orbiting that star. There might be life forms and entire civilizations that haven't even heard of the Construct, or the deadliest weapon in their arsenal. The name Jass Beylar might be as alien to them as they are to me. What would life look like if Reza and I travelled there and began a new life together? Would she be able to say goodbye to the people of Pirius? And would I be able to settle for a life of peace and simplicity, if it meant that I got to spend it with her?

My mind is reeling. I let it spin for hours. When I finally can't take it anymore, I carefully slide my arm out from Reza's head, and I lay her down on her pillows. When she wakes, she'll find me gone, and a thousand thoughts will split her head apart. Did I just use her body for my pleasure and then leave at the earliest opportunity, without a care for her feelings? Was the rough affection I showed to her just part of a game to me? Am I now back in my own room, laughing at her stupidity for giving herself to me in person?

My chest tightens when I consider how she'll view my stealthy departure, but I have to go. There are things I need to know. There's someone I have to see.

The Reckoning Hall is quiet, but it's a living kind of silence. It breathes, inhaling and exhaling, the triumphs and failures of so many of Pirius' apprentices echoing from the jagged, uneven walls like cries from another lifetime.

My feet are still bare. The loose, dry dirt beneath my soles is cool and comforting, connecting me with this strange, unwelcoming planet in a way I haven't felt before. I stand in the very center of the hall, my head craning back, looking up at the stalactites that hang from the vaulted rafters. The crooked fingers of stone appear to be pointing at me accusingly, demanding I turn around and head back the way I came.

"I knew tonight would be the night," Darius says, emerging from the shadows. "I'm glad it is."

I keep staring at the stalactites, locked to the spot. I'm not ready to face him yet. "You're infuriatingly sure of yourself for someone who can't see the future anymore," I murmur. "When I came here last, you said you wouldn't help me with my...*issue*...unless I agreed to your terms. I didn't agree, and yet you helped me anyway."

Darius inclines his head. "That's true."

"Why?"

"Because." He shrugs—a very human action. "Reza needed you to be okay. I needed Reza to be okay. And there was a hope within me that you would come and enquire what I would have asked

of you when the time was right. That *is* why you've come now, isn't it?"

The Construct taught me that being predictable was a risk. I learned at a young age that being unknowable would keep me safe. One step ahead of my enemies. I don't like that Darius can apparently see straight through me. Still, he's right, and there's no sense in contradicting him. I fold my arms across my chest, clenching my jaw. "You wanted me to spare this planet. To talk with the Construct. To divert them somehow. But I already agreed to Reza's bargain, giving you all of those things."

Darius paces around me, head down. By looks of things, he's thinking deeply. "I wasn't going to bargain with you for the planet. I like to dream a little bigger than most."

"You would have asked for more?"

He nods. "I would have asked for more, and for much less. I would have asked you for something very simple. I would have asked you to take down your walls."

A cold, uneasy flush creeps across my skin. "My walls?"

"The ones you have constructed around your heart. The ones you've used to barricade yourself inside your own mind for cycles."

I laugh. My voice rings hollow against the Reckoning Hall walls. "What good would that have

done you? That wouldn't have saved any of your people."

A wry smile tugs at his strange features. "Perhaps not. Perhaps all of my people, myself included, will still perish in the trouble to come. But..." He pauses, his smile growing wider. "The ability to observe a bigger picture is a marvelous thing, Jass. If your walls came down, you'd be able to *feel* again. You'd be open to the beauty in the universe and all those who live in it. You wouldn't be able to hide behind a shield anymore. And then what?"

I don't like where this is heading. "And then nothing," I say sharply.

"And then...*everything*," he counters. "Do you think you would stand by and allow planet after planet to be destroyed if you felt the pain of every living thing that died there? Do you think you'd allow the Construct to murder and pillage civilization and civilization, if every scream from mother's lips, and every cry from a terrified child pierced your heart? I don't think so."

"You knew I would never agree to that. That's why you didn't ask me," I say. He's crazy if he thinks I'd ever compromise myself in that kind of way.

Darius gathers his robes about himself, drawing them tighter against an invisible draft. "Yes. I also didn't ask you the last time we met here, because

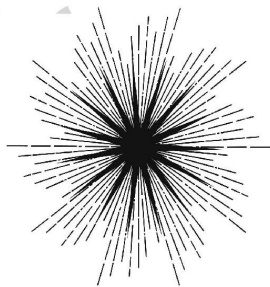
an alternative outcome developed in my mind. I saw your walls coming down of your own free will, without the need for bargain or trade.”

No. No way. I shake my head, pacing toward the exit of the hall. “You’re *insane*.”

“It turns out I was right to wait, Jass,” Darius calls after me. “Can you deny it? Can you deny that you haven’t been changing since the Light left your system? Slowly but surely, you’re surrendering yourself to the possibility that the Construct’s way might not be the *only* way. And you’ve allowed Reza inside. You can lie to yourself until the end of time, but you know the truth. You care for her deeply. And loving her will be the one thing that saves you. You’ll fight for what’s right in the end, Jass. I have no doubt about it.”

Of all the crazy, delusional things a person can say. Darius has moved way past optimism, and is currently residing in the land of make believe. “I am *not* the man you think I am,” I tell him.

“Probably not. But isn’t that wonderful? *There’s every possibility that you could be so much more.*”



TWENTY-SIX

REZA

ORAXIS

Hammering on the door.

Loud.

Abrasive.

Annoying.

I sit bolt upright, my heart skipping all over the place.

“Reza! Reza, open the door. You have to come. *Now!*”

I climb out of bed in a fog, my body aching, my head thumping. I have no idea who’s yelling on the other side of my door, but when I find out who it is, I’m going to—

“Col. What a pleasant surprise.” The man stands on the other side of the door, hair all mussed on one side, presumably from where he was sleeping on it. His eyes are wide, his pupils twice

their normal size.

“Jass didn’t sleep in his bed last night,” Col rushes out, hurrying past me and into my room. “His bed was untouched. His shirt was lying on the floor, along with the rest of his clothes. He either decided to go wandering around the sub city in nothing but his pants last night, or he’s stolen provisions and supplies and he’s left.”

Hells. My cheeks are on fire and the burn is creeping down my neck, biting fiercely. Jass *was* wandering around the sub city in nothing but his pants last night. He came here. He came to me. I slept with him, and now...

Where the hell is he?

My stomach rolls over on itself, threatening to dump its contents on the floor at my feet. “He hasn’t left the sub city,” I say, swallowing hard. “He wouldn’t.”

“Why not?” Col wrings his hands, the mirror of Erika’s concern when Jass first arrived here. “He doesn’t care about Pirius.”

I hate the words that I speak next. At least a part of me does. “He would never leave me behind.”

Col’s expression falters. A stormy expression flits across his face. “Yes. You’re right, I suppose. Farren’s on the warpath this morning, though. He called a council meeting before the city even woke, and I wasn’t invited. That’s no big surprise, but

Darius wasn't summoned either. And Chancellor Gain said Farren was calling for all non-Pirians to be exiled from the planet. If Jass is walking around the sub city and Farren crosses paths with him, gods knows what will happen."

We both know what will happen. Jass will kill Farren if he upsets him, and then the deception we've been struggling to maintain here will be well and truly over. The people will never trust Jass. Mass hysteria will spread throughout the sub city, and any hope of persuading him to side with us in the battle to come will be gone forever.

"We have to find him," Col says, rubbing his hands over his face. "I never thought I'd say this, but maybe it's better if we give Farren what he wants. If we leave, no one will come to any harm."

"We can't leave. This is your home, Col. Farren has no right to force you out of it." Since I arrived here, Piriuss has been my home, too. The prospect of leaving hurts me more than I ever considered it might. Col doesn't say anything. His pain is obvious, though. He wears it like a shroud. "Where would we even go?" I ask. "It's not as if there are a thousand ships just buried under the sand up there."

Col's eyes flash. "Let's just focus on finding Beylar first."

Finding Jass is much easier than Col probably expected. The strength of the tether is a million fold what it was before I slept with Jass. Now, I can feel his anger. I can pinpoint his exact location in the sub city without even trying. My feet carry us toward him without any urging from me. We locate him in the communications hall, alone, which is strange since I haven't seen a desk unmanned since I met Erika here the night I arrived.

Jass sits at the control desk at the very front of the hall, head bent over the screen. Waves of his dark hair fall into his face as he pores over the read out. A memory of last night bursts through my head—Jass' hair falling into my eyes as he covered my body with his, his mouth and his hands everywhere, lighting up my skin—and I find myself blushing. Thankfully, aside from the canopy of projected stars mapped out on the ceiling overhead, the comms hall is in darkness, so Col doesn't witness my reaction.

Jass doesn't look up. He senses me and stiffens, his hand freezing on the screen for a second before continuing to trace across it. Col curses under his breath. "Where is everyone?" he demands. "Jass, where are all the technicians? There's supposed to be someone here at all times."

"I sent them away." Jass' soft voice rings out through the empty space.

“When you say you sent them away, do you mean...?”

“No, I do *not* mean that I killed them,” Jass replies flatly. “I mean I sent them away. I told them to leave.”

“They wouldn’t have just left. Not unless you...”

Jass slowly lifts his head and looks at Col. “I may have manipulated them a little. They’re all fine, though. You have my word.”

Col hisses under his breath. “Someone needs to be monitoring the sensors. We have to know the moment Construct ships jump out of hyperspace.”

“What do you think *I’m* doing?”

Col hurries across the hall and stands behind Jass, peering over his shoulder. “What have you done to the screen? That’s not a standard read-out.”

“I fixed it. Improved it. Now you can track in hyperspace.” Jass huffs heavily down his nose as he finally turns his gaze on me. “You look tired. Didn’t you sleep well?”

I’m fairly confident my blush covers my whole body at this point. “No, I didn’t, actually. I had the worst dream.”

Jass smirks. The blue glow from the screen lights up the right side of his face in profile, casting shadows across the left. Only he can devastate me and steal the oxygen from my lungs with a single second of eye contact. “Still haven’t mastered the

art of lying, I see,” he muses. “You could learn a thing or two from me. If only you’d spend some more time with me.”

“The last thing Reza wants is more time with you,” Col says. “I, on the other hand, have a fairly open calendar. If you want to teach me to lie like a Construct traitor, then please...I’d relish the opportunity. Maybe afterward, we can play some music? Drink some tea? I haven’t had much downtime recently.”

I stare at the back of Col’s head as if it will crack open like a nut and spill his weirdness out all over the place. I haven’t seen anyone else joke or employ sarcasm around Jass. It’s just as obvious as night is night and day is day: Jass is not the sort of person you engage with in witty banter. Col just doesn’t give up, though. Jass blinks carefully as he swivels his head to look at the other man.

“You wouldn’t like my kind of music,” he says. “Too much screaming.”

Col slaps him on the back. “Never mind. We’ll figure something out. Come on. We have to leave.”

Jass’ head tips to one side and he narrows his eyes at Col. Col winces, staggering back from the control desk, holding a hand to his head. “Anyone ever told you it’s rude to dip into someone’s mind without their consent?”

“Plenty of times.” Jass nods. “I assumed I was being discreet, though. I’ll tread a little lighter next

time.”

“How about you just *ask* me a question next time, and I’ll give you the answer?”

Jass ignores Col’s fiery retort and turns to me. “If Farren’s the only reason you want to run from this place, why can’t I just kill him? He wants both of *you* dead. Is that not good enough reason? You’re worried what’ll happen when he tells everyone who I am. If he can’t tell everyone who I am...”

His logic, worryingly, makes some sort of sense. These are times fraught with danger—life is about to become very difficult for the people of Pirius—and if Farren wasn’t around, maybe Darius could take over the first sector. Or Col, even if he doesn’t like the idea very much. He would do it if it meant saving everyone. If Farren were gone, things might look a little safer around here. At least for the immediate future. And then Col wouldn’t have to leave.

When is it okay to justify murder, though? When is it okay to judge someone and make the decision that their life should not continue?

“When they put you in danger.”

Jass doesn’t open his mouth or make a sound, but I’m not stupid. I know his voice. was listening to my thoughts. Gods, the connection between us really is stronger than ever. I raise my shields, slamming them into place, and Jass’ eyes turned to

cold pressed steel. He's angry that I've shut him out. Col was right, though. It's rude to bully your way into someone's mind without permission, and my head is the only place left sacred to me. I've given him my body. I've given him more than I ever should have. I want to give him everything, but that just can't be allowed to happen.

"Farren's protected. He's had a fleet of people watching over him since the election last night. It's as if he's already afraid for his life or something. I asked around. I thought maybe something happened during the gathering, but no one seems to know anything," Col says.

Jass stands abruptly, almost sending the chair he was sitting on toppling over. "Fine," he says. "We'll leave. But I'm driving."

Darius refuses to come with us. He claims he needs to stay in order to keep Farren in line, but I have no idea how he plans on accomplishing that with the other man cutting him out of the sub city's meetings.

For once, the skies over Pirius are clear. The sandstorms have been a daily feature of life on the planet's surface for as long as I've been here, and to be able to see from horizon to horizon is more than unusual. We leave the sub city through a hatch

above one of the ventilation units. The stark, blazing light from the suns overhead burns my eyes as I scramble out into the sand. Jass follows behind me, lifting himself above ground with no apparent effort. Col comes last, fastening and locking the hatch behind him.

“Due north,” he says, pointing off into the distance. “By the tree. That’s where we’re headed.”

I’ve never seen a tree on Pirius before and I can’t see one now, but Col seems certain. He sets off marching, and I fall in behind him. When I throw a glance over my shoulder to make sure Jass is following, I find he isn’t. Of course he isn’t. Why am I even surprised? I allow Col to go on ahead. When he’s out of earshot, I ask the question that’s been bothering me since we found Jass in the comms hall. “Why did you do that? With the screen? Why did you fix it so they can detect ships in hyperspace?”

“I was bored.”

“Boredom makes a man drink. Boredom makes a man sleep in bed all day. Boredom doesn’t make a man repair the technology of the people he considers his enemies.”

“I don’t consider them my enemy.” He speaks as though the idea that the Pirians might be a thorn in his side has never occurred to him before.

“They’re a nuisance. They blind men fumbling

around in the dark. That's all they are."

I look him up and down, trying to see something else in him. He must be lying. He still hasn't given me a real answer to my question. "*You wanted to help.*" It's surprisingly easy to speak into his mind. I thought it would take more concentration, but it's the same as opening my mouth and saying the words out loud. Jass develops a monumental scowl.

"If I wanted to help, I would have gone from room to room and put them all out of their misery."

"You did it because you knew we were leaving, and you wanted to help."

He says nothing in response. Instead, he sets off walking after Col, brushing past me. His hand touches mine, and for a second I can't see. I'm enveloped in more memories of last night—Jass using that hand to stroke and caress my skin. His lips pressed against my stomach, my cheek, my mouth, my breasts. And I see what he saw, too. My hands on *his* skin. The flush in my cheeks. The way my lips parted when he pushed himself inside me. I hear the sound of my own voice crying out his name.

I stagger, shocked by how vivid the sensations were. Jass cringes, as if he just said something he wished he hadn't.

"You weren't supposed to see that." His tone is

clipped and hard, but there's something softer lying underneath. Something he *really* doesn't want me to see.

"I assumed you hadn't given last night another thought," I answer.

Standing above me on the dune now, Jass looks back at me and laughs inside his head. *"Some events indelibly mark themselves on you, Reza. I'll never be able to escape what happened between us last night. You're being ridiculous if you think I could."*

"Then why are you being so cold? You held me for hours last night. You stroked my hair. You held onto me like I was life itself. And then, when I see you again, you act as if nothing happened."

Jass is a tower of marble. I can't read his face or the way he's holding his body. He turns away from me and pushes on up the dune, leaving me behind. I can hardly keep up with his long, forceful strides. "I don't know what you want from me," he says out loud, though quiet enough that Col doesn't hear him. *"I don't even know what the hell is going on anymore."*

"I just want you to be honest."

"And good. And kind. A man ready to lay down his life for a race he doesn't even know. You want me to be everything I'm not."

"I want you fucking try! Seriously, Jass. Am I really asking for so much? Is the concept of you not

killing people so damned difficult to entertain, even for a moment? *For me?*” My voice carries farther than I anticipated; Col stumbles on the ridgeline ahead of us. He doesn’t turn around, but there’s no way he didn’t hear me. If I could, I’d snatch the words out of the air and cram them back into my mouth. Damn it.

Jass stops dead. “All right.” Blowing out a deep, unhappy breath, he shoots a burning sideways glance at me. “I’m going to *try*, Reza. For you. I’m going to try and put aside everything I know and everything I’ve been taught, and I’m going to try and help you beat Regis. Just—just *don’t* make a big deal out of this,” he says, holding up his hand, cutting me off before I can speak.

I’m smiling, though. Grinning from ear to ear. A spark of hope has ignited inside me. I never thought he’d agree to it, but he’s going to help us. Erika’s vision was right. And if she was right about Jass joining us, then she was probably right about us being victorious over the Construct, too.

Jass carries on walking. His boots mow through the sand like he doesn’t feel the suns beating on his back and the exercise isn’t making his heart work harder. He bypasses Col, and he doesn’t look back. When I reach Col, my friend takes hold of my arm and squeezes hard.

“Black holes are magnificent, Reza. When you see the spirals of light disappearing inside them,

they put on quite the show. Never forget they're deadly, though. They destroy anything that draws too close."

"That sounds like something Darius would say," I pant, moping sweat from my forehead with the back of my arm.

"It is. And he did. Please, Reza. *Please*. Be careful."

The tree Col mentioned is actually a radio tower, eighty meters high and bristling with antennas, protected from the sand storms by a thick plasticast housing. Turns out Col's never actually seen a real tree before. And the hulking pleasure cruiser he uncovers five feet from the radio mast would have been dated a hundred cycles ago, and that's being kind. The people of Pirius rarely leave the surface of the planet, so it's a miracle Col even managed to salvage the rusting, dented, beat up vessel. The Oraxis' thrusters are filled with sand, and the ancient paint job is so sandblasted and eroded that it's impossible to tell what colors originally marked the metalwork. Col stands back from the craft with his hands on his hips, eyeing it like it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. "Took me cycles to make this thing fly," he says with pride. "Had to do some pretty unspeakable things with a woman from

Anderas in order to get the nav systems replaced. A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into this thing. And a few other bodily fluids I don't really want to talk about."

I cringe, trying not to laugh. Laughing doesn't really seem appropriate right now, and if I start, I might end up crying instead.

"That thing will never get us through the atmosphere," Jass says bluntly. He kicks at the hull with the toe of his boot. "I've seen some junkers in my time, but this is beyond the pale."

"She *will* breach the atmosphere. She's done it before." Col tone suggests he's more than a little offended by our reactions.

Jass, as ever, doesn't seem to give a shit. "How many times?"

"Does it really matter? All you need to know is that it's possible."

"So just the once then," Jass says, nodding as he stares at the craft.

"Yes. Just once. But once is enough."

Jass inhales deeply, pacing back and forth in front of the pleasure cruiser. He places his palm against the riveted metal panels, obviously repaired and patched a thousand times, and he goes still. A moment later he drops his hand and lifts one shoulder. "All right, then. Let's get on with this." He disappears around the side of the cruiser and the hatch opens, sending a cloud of sand billowing up

into the air.

I try to disguise my hesitation, but Col is an intuitive guy. He nudges me with his shoulder, grinning. “You think I’d let you step foot on this thing if I didn’t think it was safe? Don’t worry. The ride might be bumpy, but we’ll get to where we’re going. I promise.”

There’s more sand inside the ship than there is outside, piled up on the shabby, well-worn carpet that lines the floor of the old pleasure cruiser. Col kicks the drift out of the hatch, muttering under his breath, and then he hits the door lock. The huge slab of metal slowly lowers, blocking out the light of the suns. The other pressure lock closes, sealing us inside.

The main body of the cruiser is furnished with scuffed plasticast chairs, painted to look like wood. Tables fill the old passenger’s seating area, most of them lop-sided or completely broken, lying in pieces on the floor. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling, the teardrop shaped cut glass dangling from their arms all caked in dirt and dust. Once upon a time, the Oraxis would have been a luxury vessel. Now it stinks of decay, rostick droppings and engine grease.

A high-pitched alarm begins to sound, and then an array of screens and panels light up, telemetry and basic life support systems reporting the ship’s status. Most of the screens are in the red,

but Col doesn't seem too worried. Jass sits silently in the pilot's seat, contemplating his hands. Col works away, prepping the Oraxis for take off. He stops suddenly, looking to Jass, as if the other man just called his name.

Without looking up, Jass says, "How do you feel about secrets?"

"Honestly? Not great."

"Didn't think so. If you could find out who killed your mother, would you want to know?"

Shit. The tension inside the ship suddenly ramps up to an eleven. Jass knows who murdered Erika? There are many things this could mean, and my gut clenches, afraid of every single possibility. Did Jass torture the information out of someone? Or, more importantly, did he lie to Col's face before? Is he really responsible for the chancellor's death?

A gamut of emotion runs over Col's weary face. "Of course I would," he whispers.

"And if you knew? What then? Revenge? Forgiveness? Would you be a better man and allow the person responsible to live? Or would you hunt them to the edges of the galaxy and make them pay for what they'd done? Even if justice came at a very high price?"

I know why he's asking this. He wants to know if Col is as pure and righteous as everyone says he is, willing to sacrifice all for the sake of the group.

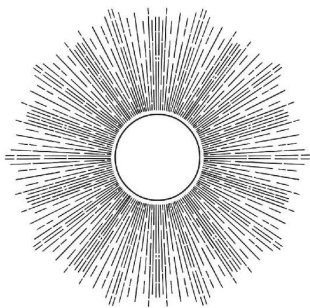
Rather, he wants to know if Col is just like him, willing to cast his goals and morals aside in order to exact vengeance upon the heads of those who have wronged him. Col looks drawn, his expression that of a troubled man.

“I don’t know,” he replies. “I honestly don’t know.”

Jass nods again. He hits the engine igniters, firing each of them in turn, until the Oraxis feels like it’s about to shake itself apart under the strain. “The person who ended your mother’s life is still on Pirius. Last chance. You want to stay and find them, or you want to leave and save the people in the sub city from possible danger?”

I could wrap my hands around Jass’ neck and tighten my grasp. Bastard. If he knows who killed Erika now, then he’s known for a while. He could have told Col back in the comms hall; he could have sought him out and told him any number of times, but he’s choosing now to spring this unfair decision on him. Col’s hands have clenched into fists, his knuckles white, his eyes distant and unreachable.

“Let’s just go,” he says softly. “Justice doesn’t have a shelf life.”



TWENTY-SEVEN

REZA

THE BIG GUNS

The Oraxis does make it out of Pirius' atmosphere, but by the skin of her teeth. Once we escape the planet's gravitational field, the ride smooths out, and Jass abandons the pilot's chair, the soles of his boots ringing out against the grated steel underfoot as he disappears into the back of the ship. I watch him go, pretending I don't, and I feel a tug down the tether as it tries to drag me along behind him. I refuse to be towed along like a dune dog on a leash, though. If Jass wants to talk to me, he can damn well ask, just like everyone else.

I haven't left the surface of Pirius in over seven cycles. I never planned on leaving, never entertained the idea of heading back out into space again, and so to find myself here now, staring out of

a view port, as white streaks of burning hot hydrogen and helium stream past, traveling at thousands of miles a second, is a bit of a shock to the system.

A little over an hour into our flight, Col receives a transmission from the surface of Pirius.

Notice: Henceforth, the ship Oraxis and its occupants will not be granted permissions to port at Pirius. Summary destruction of all properties belonging to COL OFFWORLDER, formerly PAKKA, and the human known as “REZA” have been carried out. Additionally, Construct leaders have been informed of JASS BEYLAR’S last known whereabouts. We assume they will be tracking your vessel shortly.

- - **Grand Elder Farren.**

I scan the message twice over just to make sure I’m reading it right. “Grand Elder Farren? Since when does Pirius have a *grand elder*?”

Col glares at the pixels in front of him, utterly dumbstruck. “Not for centuries. Before the sub city was divided up and a duly appointed seer took over administration of each sector, only one seer ruled the entire city. A grand elder. It was later decided that a council of leaders would prevent corruption and aid in diplomacy efforts between the

quarrelling families spread across the sub city, though. That was a long time ago.”

“So, if Farren’s declared himself grand elder, what does that mean for Chancellor Gain?

Col’s mouth twists into a worried grimace. “I don’t know. He might have had to step down from his post. If that’s the case, he’s probably being held in his quarters, out of the public eye. Gain’s popular in his sector. Farren wouldn’t chance allowing him free rein of the sub city, where he could cause riots and dissent. And he’d never allow him to leave. There are miles and miles of unoccupied tunnels and caverns beyond the sub city. It would be easy for a rebel group to set up a base close by and cause havoc for Farren and his men.”

“And Darius?”

“Darius will have received the same treatment.”

“Farren wouldn’t have...” I swallow down my dread, forcing the words out. “You don’t think he would have had them killed, do you?” I *knew* we should have insisted Darius come with us when we left. He’s always been so stubborn, though. Single minded in his purpose. His love for Pirius and its people knows no bounds. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do to save his race, and that includes staying behind to shield them from the fall out when tensions are running high.

“I don’t know. He’s not exactly behaving

rationally. He contacted the Construct, for fuck's sake," Col says. "He purposefully reached out to the very people my mother told him were going to wipe us all out, just to spite me. I can't believe he did it."

"Will Regis be able to track the Oraxis through hyperspace?" I ask. Bile rises to the back of my throat at the very thought of the Construct. The Nexus has been a ground base since it's completion, but it does have flight capabilities. No doubt a solid portion of its structure would be heavily damaged by uprooting it from its foundations on Darax, but Regis wouldn't give that a second thought if Stryker was whispering sweet nothings into his ear about victory. Even if they don't uproot The Nexus, the base is large enough to house at least two jump ships capable of carrying an entire fleet of raptors right to us. They have plenty of tools at hand, and we have a rusting cruiser that was too old to be useful two hundred cycles ago.

Col pulls a face. "Who do you think taught Jass how to upgrade those scanners back in the comms hall?"

"They *will* find us." From the back of the ship, Jass raises his voice. I thought he'd gone into the back sleeping quarters and passed out, considering how quiet he's been. He hasn't, though. He's sitting on an up-ended crate of phase rifle ammo packs.

“Once Regis has his mind set on something, he’ll make sure it comes to pass. We’re hurtling through space in a coffin right now. We need to land. Somewhere we’ll be able to pick up another transport. Somewhere they won’t expect us to go.”

“How long until we reach another outpost that might have ships for barter?” I ask Col.

He consults the star chart in front of him. “Two hours at least.”

Two hours. Two hours in a pleasure cruiser that might break down at any moment. The Construct’s ships are far faster and far more reliable than the Oraxis, and Col knows it. A bead of sweat forms on his forehead, rolling down the side of his face.

“What kind of weapons system does this ship have?” I ask.

He gives me a weak smile. “None. This craft was used solely for leisure tours, not fighting.”

If the situation could have possibly gotten any worse, it just did. I tamp down my rising fear and stalk back into the storage area of the ship. Coming to a halt in front of Jass, I fold my arms across my chest, staring him down when his eyes meet mine. “Well? Somewhere we might be able to pick up another transport? Somewhere they wouldn’t expect us to go? I’m assuming you have somewhere in mind?”

Jass sighs, getting to his feet. “I do actually.” He reaches into his pocket and draws something

out, tossing it to Col. Something small, black and cylindrical. A data stick. Col catches it out of the air, turning it over in his hand. “Plug the coordinates stored on there into the nav systems. They’ll take us somewhere close. Somewhere safe. I know the place like the back of my hand.”

So secretive. I place my hand on his chest, preventing him from walking away. “Where are you sending us? Where do those coordinates lead, Jass? You can’t just expect us to follow you blindly into the unknown.”

“It’s a surprise,” he tells me.

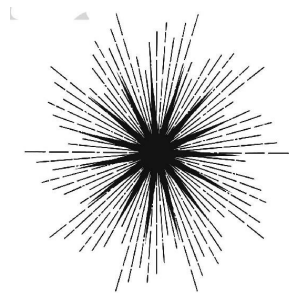
“No. No more surprises. I need to know if there’s a fortification wherever we’re headed. If there’s any chance we might be safe.”

Jass frowns, tipping his head to one side. My dark, strange, tormented prince. “There *is* a fortification,” he replies. “The whole place is a fortress. Stronger than most.”

“Uh, guys? Once you’re done bickering, might I suggest we get the hell out of here? We’re about to have company, and it looks like they brought the big guns.” Col angles his sensor array, and on it a sea of Construct targets, all headed our way. Three jump ships, along with an armada of raptors and smaller drones. For a second it looks as though the top of Col’s screen is malfunctioning; a bright green circle lowers onto the array, completely blocking out the top quarter of the screen. Then I realize the

screen is working perfectly. The incomprehensibly large object is not a sensor fault at all, but a behemoth-sized vessel. Jass grunts, cracking his knuckles one by one. He doesn't look happy. He does *not* look happy at all.

“The Nexus,” he says grimly. “They didn't just bring out the big guns. They brought out their *biggest*.”



TWENTY-EIGHT

JASS

HYPERSPACE

My stomach cartwheels as we jump to hyperspace. You can barely feel the shift on larger ships, but the Oraxis is a completely different story. The old pleasure craft was made for cruising through solar nurseries and orbiting white dwarfs at a respectable distance, its passengers watching the births and deaths of stars while sipping on sparkling alcohol out of fluted, cut crystal glasses. It was not intended as a getaway vehicle for escaping irate intergalactic overlords.

I grab hold of Reza, crushing her to my body as the craft jolts and pitches, struggling to find its path through the planes of hyperspace. Col hollers something from the cockpit, but I can't hear what he's saying. All I can hear is Reza's labored breathing and her pounding heartbeat. The sound of

her alarm fills my head, and I'm paralyzed. I need to protect her. I need to make sure she comes through this alive. I've been trying to distance myself from her since she came to find me in the comms room, and everything was going according to plan. That is, until I saw the lengths Stryker has gone to. Uprooting The Nexus is no easy task. It will have cost the Construct dearly. The station was always intended as a planetary base, not a space-faring warship. The fuel it takes to power the thing is impossible to maintain. And to lift the base from the ground, it must rip itself free from its foundations, sheering through thousands of tons of metal. Once it's jettisoned its site back on Darax, it's impossible to ever land it again. The fact that Regis has ordered The Nexus to come after us speaks volumes. He is willing to lose everything. He's willing to lose his most prized possession in order to punish me for what I've done.

I wanted to find, capture and claim Reza. Instead I ended up losing myself to her, and now we're probably both about to die. Because of me.

"They're not following," Col shouts over the roar of the ships engines. "Oh, no, wait. Yes they are. *Fuck!*"

I curve my hands around Reza's face, lifting her chin so that she's looking up at me. She was angry before, tense and stressed. Now she's just afraid. "*It's going to be all right.*" I imprint the

words into her, and for once she doesn't resist me. She lets me in for the briefest of moments, and I see everything. The structure of her mind is so similar to mine—an intricate mandala of pathways and connections, boggling in their complexity. It's beautiful. *She* is beautiful.

I see the pain she's suffered, and the all joy she's experienced, and it tears me apart. A lot of the time, I was the cause of her pain. Not all of the time, but more often than not. And her happiest moments? The moments when she felt most free and safe? Those were the moments where, briefly, she was able to forget that I even existed. I've done nothing but hurt her, and yet she's here right now, clinging to me, hoping I can change and be something better for her.

Her eyes are bright, wide, but unafraid. "*Can you take it from me?*" she replies. "*Can you take all of the energy from me and still leave me alive?*"

I've thought about it. I've thought about the possibility of taking her power from her. Things changed, though. Everything changed. And besides, even if it is possible for me to syphon energy from Reza, I know with a certainty that I wouldn't be able to take it all. There'd be nothing of her left. I shake my head, and a little of the light in her eyes fades. "*If you take it all, will you be strong enough to stop them?*" she persists.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter, though. I won’t do it.”

“Isn’t that why you chased me down? Your desire for more power? If I offer it freely, you’ll be unstoppable. You’ll be able to put an end to Regis and Stryker once and for all.”

I don’t want to fight this anymore. I’m so tired of maintaining the illusion that my heart doesn’t sing every time Reza walks into a room. It’s exhausting, and the lie no longer serves any real purpose. I have to do what Darius told me to. I have to let down my walls. I have no idea how, though. I start with some simple truths. *“I chased you down, because I had to. I didn’t understand why, then, but I do now. It wasn’t because your energy was calling to me. It was because you were, Reza. I’m...fuck, I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through. The lengths you’ve had to go to to protect yourself from me. It should never have been like that. I was meant to be your protector. You were meant to be mine. I know that.”*

Her eyes grow round. Her flushed, swollen lips part, and I wait, ready to hear whatever it is she has to say. If she wants to send me away, I’ll do it. I’ll go.

“JASS! Get up here! They’re moving faster than us! How’s that even possible?” Col’s hoarse shout cuts through my thoughts, sweeping me away from Reza’s mind. I’m back in the Oraxis, bathed in

the red light from the proximity alarm that's wailing right above my head. Reza's hands shake as she urges me up toward the cockpit.

“Go! Go, Jass. *Help him!*”

One hundred and eighty-six thousand, two hundred and eighty-two miles per second: the speed of light. Once you engage a hyper drive and breach faster-than-light travel, you remain at a constant speed until you disengage the drive. There's no way Col should be screaming that The Nexus is gaining on us in hyperspace; if we entered hyperspace before the Construct, the distance between us should remain the same until one or both of us drop back into normal space. But when I reach Col and he jabs his finger at his array, I see he's telling me the truth.

No...fucking...way...

The Construct have somehow developed a technology far beyond that of a hyperdrive. The Nexus is a colossal vessel, and right now it's hauling ass. “How long until we reach our target?” I yell.

“Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds!”

“Can you open the cargo bay doors with the drives engaged?”

Col looks at me like I've lost my mind. “Hell no! The atmosphere will be ripped right out of the ship. None of the seals will hold under such a drastic pressure change. And at these speeds, the

ship will break apart. ”

I grind my teeth together until it feels like they're about to crack. “Never mind. When I give you the command, just open them. I'll keep us alive.”

“What do you mea—*hey!* *Jass!* Where the hells are you going?”

I leave Col behind, wrestling to keep the Oraxis level and in the game, and I hurdle over the benches in the passenger area, hurrying to the back of the ship. Reza's right behind me. I can feel her worry through the connection, trying to hold me back. “What are you doing?” she calls. “How can I help?”

I point to the tower of crates stacked in the cargo hold—the same crates I was sitting on just now. “Open them up. Take the lids of five of them at least.”

Reza does what I've asked. She falters when she rips the lid off the first crate and she sees what's inside: glowing blue plasma shells, designed for the sole purpose of refilling phase-rifles. At least a hundred of them. Very safe when in their sealed cartridges, but when exposed to immense heat and pressure...

Realization dawns on Reza's face, and her skin pales. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Absolutely not.” I open up the red box on the wall and rifle through its contents until I find what

I'm looking for: a med scanner. The smallest electrical charge. That's all I need. The med scanner will be able to provide the spark, and the plasma shells will do the rest. "Strap yourself in, Reza." I command Col to fasten his harness, too. Reza sits herself down on an engineer's bench, tightening the harness around her slender frame. Her pulse is racing all over the place. I can feel it through the tether, urging my own pulse to speed ahead, out of control. I calm both her heart rate and mine, enough that she doesn't look like her head's about to explode anymore.

"How long until we drop out of hyperspace now?" I call through the comms unit on the wall next to me.

"Two minutes, ten seconds," Col replies. "And about fifteen seconds until The Nexus is right on top of us. I can see the damn thing through the view port, Jass!"

"Everything's going to be fine. When I tell you, open the cargo hold doors. I'll send the crates and the med scanner out into the path of The Nexus. Once they're clear of us, I'll trigger the scanner. Hopefully the blast will be closer to The Nexus than it is to us."

"That's your big plan? No fucking way!"

Across from me, Reza looks terrified. "There has to be another way. If we just—" She stops herself. "Gods. You're right. We just have to risk it,

Col. We're out of time."

"Take a deep breath," I yell. "Once the doors are open, the oxygen inside the ship will evacuate. Don't try and hold the breath. If you do, your lungs will explode. Just let it out slowly, a little at a time. One continuous stream. You understand?"

Col swears at the top of his lungs. Reza simply nods. She's afraid now. Hell, I'm a little fucking worried. I place the med scanner in one of the crates, amongst the glowing plasma cartridges, and then I strap myself in opposite Reza.

"How long can a human survive in space without a suit?" she asks.

"Ninety seconds. But don't worry. We only need to make it thirty." I hit the comms panel on the wall and give the order. "Open the door, Col. Do it now!" Reza sucks in a breath. I nearly burst my own lungs with the amount of oxygen I force into them.

The nine foot high cargo door is there.

I blink.

The nine foot high cargo door is gone.

Then...

Silence.

I'm ready for the massive, instant pressure that hits the ship. I close my mind around the outer hull, locking it tightly in place. Not an easy task. I can make sure we don't explode into a million pieces for a short amount of time, but we're going to have

to be quick about this.

The straining of the Oraxis' hyper drive disappears. The thrumming and rushing of my own blood churning around my body. The sound of the anti-rad panels being ripped from the interior of the ship and whipping away, out into space. I can't hear any of it. The crates containing the plasma cartridges are picked up and sucked out of the yawning maw that now exists at the rear of the Oraxis, and then they're gone, too. Behind us, the crates and debris from inside the ship have been pushed away from us by the pressure of the atmosphere leaving the Oraxis, but they're still traveling through hyper space at a constant speed.

A blur of blue and white light stands between us and the crates. And beyond the crates: The Nexus. Looming, black, industrial metal. Giant turrets, bristling with phase canons. The Nexus is not a pretty machine; it was designed as a stronghold, and that is exactly what it is. The vacuum pulls at my arms and legs, trying to tease me out of my harness, to suck me out into oblivion. I'm freezing cold, an agonizing pain shooting through my body as I slowly allow the air inside my lungs to release. Across the other side of the cargo hold, Reza is clinging onto the bottom of the bench she's sitting on with her eyes screwed tightly shut. Her lips are pursed, though; she's obviously following my instructions. If she weren't, she'd

already be dead.

The Nexus draws even closer. Close enough that I can see the phase canons mounted on the underside of the monstrosity swiveling, taking aim, preparing for when we drop out of hyperspace.

Now's the time.

I have to act.

I extend my right arm, hand outstretched, focusing on the crates. The med scanner is in there; I reach out with my mind, searching for its location, and I lock onto it. All I have to do is short out the electronics inside it now. The relays inside it will blow, causing a fire, and then...

Out of the corner of my eye, something snags at my attention. The sole of Reza's boot. Whipping my head around, I nearly screw up and blow out the contents of my lungs.

"Reza!"

She's no longer strapped into her harness. She's grasping hold of the bench, her hands white with the effort, her body stretching out toward the open cargo door. She's going to be pulled out of the damn ship.

"Jass!" Her voice is frantic inside my head.

"The harness snapped. I can't hold on!"

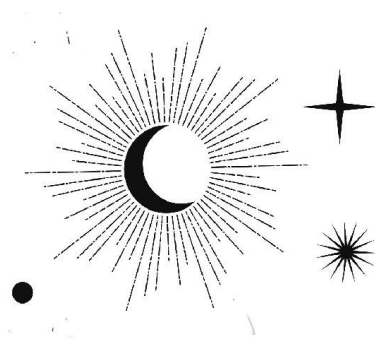
"Do not let go!" How did this happen? I watched her fastening herself in only moments ago. The harness was done up properly. I could see that myself. I thrust out my other hand, grappling hold

of Reza with my mind. I feel her relief when she senses that I've got her; it travels down the link in surges that threaten to flood my head completely.

"Thank you. Gods, I thought I was dead for sure. I—"

It happens very quickly. I have hold of her in my mind one second, and then she's being ripped away from me. I don't even see the container tearing free from the wall and hurtling toward her. I jump as the large metal lock box crashes into Reza's body, sending her flying from my grasp.

Out into hyperspace.



TWENTY-NINE

REZA

MERCY

I'm falling, and I'm not. My body is being pulled in a thousand directions at once. My need to open my mouth and scream is all consuming, but I don't. Maybe it's the sheer surprise of being torn out of the Oraxis, but I manage to keep myself from expelling the remainder of my oxygen as I hurtle out of the open cargo doors. I'm able to scream inside my head, though.

"JAAAASSSS!"

I am going to die. I am going to die, and the very last thing I see, burned into the very foundations of my soul, is the look of horror on Jass' face. He's on his feet and moving before I can blink. His hand is reaching out to me, his fingers splayed, his eyes shining brightly with

determination.

His boots are planted firmly on the deck of the Oraxis' cargo bay; the ship is pumping out O₂ in an attempt to replace the missing atmosphere, but the roaring wind spewing out into space doesn't affect him. His clothes flap and snap around him and his hair swirls and dances around his face, but his body remains locked in place, unmoving and strong.

I hit one of the crates, the corner of the plasticast box striking me square in the back, and still I don't scream. The impact itself doesn't hurt. Every cell of my body is threatening to break apart, so the pain isn't localized. It's everywhere, radiating through me like an agonizing inferno.

One second?

Five?

Ten?

How long has it been? How long can I survive like this? Everything has slowed. My eyes are bleeding. Crimson tears that cloud my vision. The silence that fills my head is deafening. I never knew anything could be so quiet. Sound doesn't exist in space. I've never fully comprehended it, though. How strange it is that so much life and creation, and how many violent ends can occur without making so much as an audible sigh out here in the cold, cosmic forever.

My head feels like it's falling apart.

Gods...

Gods, I'm going to pass out.

It'll be a mercy. I won't be conscious when the end comes for me. I'll drift into nothingness before my body freezes or my organs burst, and I won't feel a damned thing.

Closing my eyes is hard. I don't want to block out my sight. I can still see Jass standing on the grated steel in the cargo bay, terrible and magnificent. I will never see him again if I lower my eyelids. I don't want this to be the end.

Not...

for...

me...

Not...

for...

us...

A firm, solid grasp forms around my body, closing in tight. So tight, I think I'm being crushed. This is it, then. Not much time left.

"Hold on. I've got you." Jass' voice is loud and clear in my head, the only solid and constant thing amongst my final, fractured thoughts. *"I'm not done with you yet,"* he tells me.

I can't hold my breath anymore. Against all odds, I'm being pulled back toward the Oraxis. I don't think I'm going to make it, though. I don't think I can. My lungs are screaming for oxygen. I need to take a breath.

Closer...

Closer...

I'm almost at the mouth of the cargo hold when I notice how badly Jass is shaking. His whole body is trembling as he reels me in. His brow is creased with deep lines. His lips are drawn back into a pained grimace, his teeth bared. This is so hard for him. He's fighting harder than I've ever seen him fight before. He makes using his abilities look so easy, so this is obviously costing him dearly.

He's trying to save me. He's still keeping the ship from splintering apart in hyperspace. He's presumably holding the crates in place, and he's also holding himself in place, too, rooting himself to the deck. He's split himself into four, and it looks like it's killing him.

His grip on me loosens, and Jass slides forward, his boots skidding across the grating, three feet closer to the open cargo doors. He's spreading himself too thin. He's not going to be able save himself, and me, and damage The Nexus.

"Blow the crates," I tell him. *"End this now."*

"I'm not blowing anything until you're back on this ship."

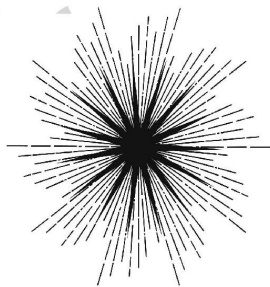
"Do the right thing, Jass. It's time. Just take my energy. You'll be strong enough to face the Construct on your own."

He shakes his head. Not even a moment's consideration. A month ago, I wouldn't have even

needed to say the words. He would have let me die and taken the power without hesitation.

“Take it now,” I tell him. *“Take it from me.”* I lower the shields that have protected me from him. I let them fall...

...and it's the last thing I do.



THIRTY

JASS

COUNTERWEIGHT

Reza's mind shuts down and opens itself to me all at once. Her eyes remain open, but I can tell she's fallen unconscious. The energy inside me acts of its own accord, reaching out for the energy that exists within her, and the two threads of power twine together, twisting into one unbreakable rope, feeding back into me. The sensation is heady and unbearable, a wave of so much energy that it threatens to overcome me. I grind my teeth together, wrestling to harness it, but it doesn't want to be harnessed. It wants to whip free of me, discharging of its own accord outward into the universe. I must contain it, though. I have to leash it if I'm going to save her.

It takes everything I have and more. It snakes its way into me and through me, lashing against my

mind, fighting me, but I do it. I tighten my grip around its slippery wraithlike form, and I command it to obey.

Reza's body flies back toward the Oraxis, crashing through the cargo doors. As soon as she clears the open secondary airlock, I access the ship's systems, and the heavy steel doors slam closed. An alarm sounds, and the airlock doors come down, the sound booming through the craft.

The Oraxis' life support systems kick in immediately, flooding the ship with atmosphere, and the gravity generators spur into action. Reza's body drops to the deck like a stone. My need to rush to her, to funnel this life-giving energy back into her body, is so strong, but there's something I have to do first.

Sucking in a ragged breath, my head tilts and spins from the rush of oxygen flooding my starving body.

"Cutting it a little close!" Col hollers from the cockpit. "I thought you were both dead."

Coughing, I run to the airlock doors and look out of the view port. The Nexus is practically on top of us. I can sense Regis' wrath, so near now that I can almost touch it. The crates containing the plasma cartridges are nowhere to be seen. Either the monstrous ship behind us has already moved past them, or they are right under the belly of the beast. "Get ready to cut the hyperdrive!" I shout.

I hope Col's heard me. If he hasn't and we're still here when the crates explode, we'll share the same fate as The Nexus. There's no time to make sure Col knows what to do, though. There's no more time at all.

I cast out my mind, hunting for the med scanner. It's still close. Not as close as I'd like, but close enough. With Reza's energy coursing through me like an electrical storm, it only takes a thought to create the spark I need. I feel the cells inside the med scanner fuse, and then...

Light.

Light, burning so bright it sears into my retinas. It's happening. The plasma cartridges are igniting. "Now, now, now!" I scream.

The Oraxis lurches, surging forward. I can't tell if we're jumping out of hyperspace or we're caught in the blast wave of the explosion that's ripping apart the blue and white streams of hyperspace behind us. I can't see a thing. The world flips and spins, and then...

Stars.

A blanket of white pin pricks as far as my blurred vision can see.

"We made it!" Col sounds even more shocked than I am. "Is The Nexus gone?"

Flames lick at the inside of the cargo bay, sparks erupting like fireworks from one of the electrical manifolds. I'm by Reza's side in the blink

of an eye, fingers searching for a pulse at her throat. Her skin is ashen, her lips tinged a worrying shade of blue. Her skin is as cold as ice.

“Please. Please. *Please* don’t be fucking dead,” I chant. I’ve never cared about another soul enough to give a damn if they lived or died. I care more than I can comprehend right now, though. If she dies, I will be true to my word. I will travel the length, breadth, and width of this galaxy until there isn’t a single life form left breathing. I will exact my infinite grief on everyone I find.

There’s no heartbeat.

The energy inside me expands and contracts, throbbing frantically. I tip Reza’s head back and I force a hurried breath of oxygen into her lungs. Her chest rises and falls once. Just once. “Come on. Come on!” Again, I breathe for her, waiting for her to start choking and coughing as she comes back to life.

Nothing happens.

Again, and again.

Still nothing.

I compress her chest. Her ribs protest, and then one of them cracks under the force of my hands, but still she doesn’t draw in a breath. “Goddamn it, Reza. Stop being so damn stubborn.”

She doesn’t hear me. She remains unresponsive as I work furiously, pumping her heart for her. The wall around her mind is completely gone; a hollow,

empty abyss is all that remains. No thoughts. No memories. Nothing at all. Not even the faintest glimmer of her. I step inside the vacant space of her mind, yelling as loud as I can.

“REZA! Don’t do this! Don’t you kindle me back to life and then fucking *leave* me. I won’t allow it!”

I wait for her to emerge out of the shadows of her mind, angry and affronted that I’ve broken my way in. She doesn’t show up, though. Doesn’t even try to shove me out of her head. There is an absence here that chills to my core. No life whatsoever.

I’m getting desperate. Energy pulses in my chest and in my hands, straining against the fragile hold I have on it. It’s far more than I could have imagined, wild and hard to suppress. It would take all of my concentration just to keep it calm and at bay, and right now I’m have other things to worry about.

The Oraxis shudders, more anti-rad tiles showering down from the ceiling, the very structure of the ship groaning. Obviously we’ve sustained some critical damage, but even that isn’t enough to distract me. I keep on working. I keep on compressing Reza’s chest. I keep on begging her to wake up.

The energy surges again, flexing, sending a crippling wave of pain through my nerve endings. I

cast the discomfort aside, redoubling my efforts, but in the end the pain won't be ignored. My hands are burning white hot. My flesh is about to crack open. I sink back onto my heels, fighting the need to scream as the energy twists and turns beneath my skin.

I have no choice. I can't keep a hold on it anymore. I mentally cut the ropes I've been trying to lash the power down with, and it surges out of me like a river of white light. I can't see it. Not in a traditional way. It's more of an innate sense of color, shape and form. The energy snaps through the air like a striking snake. It hits the cargo bay wall, and the metal shatters into splinters, creating a hole two meters in diameter. Thankfully there's another room beyond the cargo bay, otherwise we'd all be dead

I try to pull the energy back, but it won't listen. It strikes again, and this time it hits Reza's lifeless body. As soon as it makes contact, something clicks in my head. This is how it was meant to be. How it was always meant to be. One person isn't strong enough to house the entirety of a force like this. Reza and I are counterweights, balancing each other out. I am a conduit, channeling the life back into her. I'm eaten alive by pain as Reza's half of the energy returns to her, but it's helping to heal her. I feel it. Her right hand twitches, and I could die from relief.

“Jass!”

Slowly, the darkness that claimed Reza’s mind begins to retreat, pulling back inch-by-inch.

“*JASS!*”

Hands pull and poke at me, violently shaking me. I open my eyes and Col’s face is in mine, urgency contorting his features. He knocks his fist against my forehead, right between my eyes. “I hate to interrupt, but The Nexus... It wasn’t destroyed. Not totally. They just dropped out of hyperdrive. And they’re pissed.”

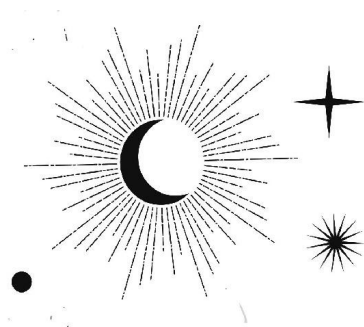
“Reza—”

Col shakes his head, hand under my arm, yanking me to my feet. “She’s waking up. She’s breathing. Even I can see that. Now tell me what to do.”

There are only a handful of things we can do to save this ship and all of us in it. I’m about to start at the top of the list, when my mind hitches on a voice. One I have trained myself to listen out for for cycles.

Regis.

I hear his thoughts, and everything tilts upon its axis. He didn’t allow me to escape through that asteroid field. He’s been playing me all along.



THIRTY-ONE

REZA

TRUE COLORS

I *was* dead. I know that. I'm not sure how long for, or why, but I feel like I'm thawing from the inside out, reanimating, and it hurts like all seven hells combined. The ground is shaking underneath me. I wince as I open my eyes, propping myself up on both elbows. Something was happening...

Something terrible happened, and I died.

I'm on a ship, and... and it's on fire.

Scrambling, I shuffle backward, away from the burning electrical manifold that's been consumed by flames, and I do my best to assess the situation.

The Oraxis.

Col.

The Nexus.

Jass.

Oh gods, where is Jass?

I can barely stand. My legs want to give out underneath me the moment I try and get up. I have to cling to a bench in order to pull myself up, and I come very close to passing out all over again.

Alarms are going off all over the pleasure cruiser. I stumble through the ship, frowning at the confusion and chaos unfolding around me: screens flashing; emergency life pods with shattered view ports, wailing, lights flickering and flashing; curtains of exposed wires hanging from the ceiling, sparking and dancing like they're alive.

In the cockpit, Col and Jass work furiously over the control panels, arguing loudly. And out of the large view port in front of them, a charcoal-black planet filling the horizon. Lights glimmer on the surface—life, somehow existing on a barren, bleak landscape, open to the void.

“Reza! Holy shit. Sit down and strap yourself in. We’re going down.” I don’t register Col’s words until he touches my arm. I stare at Jass as he fights to address a series of blaring system failures on the screen in front of him. He casts a brief, harried glance over his shoulder, and something amazing happens: he smiles at me. A beautiful, brief, broken smile that hits me like a punch to my stomach.

“What happened?” My throat feels like I’ve been eating glass.

“Explanations later.” Col stabs a finger at the

view port, to the left of the cracked—and still cracking—glass. The Nexus is there, looming in the dark. Half of the ship's engulfed in flames, and the aft section is almost gone. A volley of blue light erupts from The Nexus' gun turrets, and Jass curses. *Loudly.*

“Brace, brace, brace!”

Two of the Construct's phase missiles flash across the bow of the Oraxis, but the last of them hits; the ship rocks violently, and I tumble into the seat behind Col, grimacing as my body tries to process the pain that flares in my side.

“What planet is that?” I wheeze, clutching at my ribs.

Jass silences an alarm, hissing. “Not a planet. A moon.”

“If it's a moon, then...where is its planet?”

“It's a rogue. It achieved escape velocity millions of years ago. It's been slowly floating through space ever since.”

“The only moon I know of like that...” I stop speaking. Gods, I don't even want to entertain the notion that Jass might have brought us to the most unspeakable place in the entire galaxy. Col does it for me, though.

“Yep. That's Archimedes,” he says grimly. A red light fills the cockpit, bathing everything in scarlet.

**“CRITICAL ERROR. IMMINENT
SYSTEM FAILURE.
CRITICAL ERROR. IMMINENT SYSTEM
FAILURE.”**

The onboard computer’s announcement fills the entire ship. Doesn’t sound good.

“What can I do?” I rasp, looking around, looking for a purpose. A way to prevent what now seems inevitable.

“Too late for emergency measures. Prepare for impact,” Jass says. “We’ll separate from the ship as soon as we’re lower than four thousand feet.”

I fumble with the safety harness, struggling to make my numb fingers clip in the buckles. Archimedes is growing in the view port and fast. We’re coming in hot. *Way* too hot. And it doesn’t look like there’s anything we can do about it.

“There’s no atmosphere down there,” I whisper.

“We’ll deal with that when we land,” Col says. His hands are a blur as they fly across the nav panel, adjusting the Oraxis’ pitch and yaw.

“*We’re never going to make it.*” I say this to myself, but Jass hears me.

“*Yes, we fucking are. We haven’t dragged this piece of shit through hell and back only to fail at the eleventh hour.*” He huffs down his nose, nostrils flared. “*And I haven’t brought you back to life just*

to lose you now."

Flashes of his memories wash over me. Images of me. My lifeless body. The panic and fear he felt as he did his best to revive me.

It's harrowing to see myself like that. Even more harrowing is the hurt that fills me. Jass' pain. I can't stop to analyze his feelings right now, though. There'll be a better time. All that matters now is our survival.

Deep ravines and crevasses slash through the surface of Archimedes, the majority of the natural rock formations running perpendicular to one another in great striations that blur past the view ports. We're so low now, much lower than four thousand feet, that I can plainly see the ground below. Rocks, like black ice or highly polished glass, with edges sharp and jagged enough to cut.

"I thought we were going to separate?" My voice sounds high-pitched and entirely unlike my own.

Jass grunts as he pulls up on the controls, sweat marking his brow. "There's something wrong with the emergency eject release mechanism."

"Can't you just force it to open? With your mind?"

"Tried. It's not playing ball."

Not playing ball? Release mechanisms have no free will of their own. They can't just decide not to open in the face of Jass' mental manipulation.

There's only one reason why he wouldn't be able to open it, and that's because he's drained. I can feel it, too. I'm alive with the energy strobing through my veins, coating every strand of hair on my head, forging unbreakable bonds with my cells on a genetic level, but I can't access it like I normally can. I can't plunge my hands into the depths of it, only skim my fingertips along its surface, as if something is blocking me. Col punches the instrument panel, snarling, and the screen splinters. "I can't make it work," he says. "Read-outs are saying The Nexus is right behind us."

"The read-outs *are* right," Jass says grimly.

Col's hands fly across the controls, adjusting and correcting as best he can. We're approaching the ground at a frightening speed now, and nothing he's doing seems to have any affect. "That can't be. *How?*" he demands.

"There is no gravity on Archimedes. None whatsoever. The Nexus can fly all the way down to the surface. They'll be landing right on top of us."

"Gods, why did you bring us here, Jass? This was the worst idea possible."

Jass' eyes have glossed over. He looks distant. Strange. "This was as good a place as any. Regis would have caught up with us no matter what, no matter how far we ran or where we ended up. Archimedes is barely inhabited. Maybe fifty scientists live here, and it's a Construct base.

They're not going to fire on their own facility. Not if they don't have to. We'll be able to set down and surrender without any one else losing their lives."

Col stops moving. He looks like he's just been stung. "You brought us here so we could give ourselves over to the Construct?"

Oh. Oh gods... No. It can't be true. Jass wouldn't just hand us over to the Construct. Not after everything we've been through over the past few weeks. He's volatile and unpredictable, and his actions are confusing and questionable more often than not, but I've seen inside his head. I know how much he hates the Construct. He wants Stryker and Regis dead just as much as I do. "Jass? Jass, you're not going to just throw your hands up and admit defeat now. You're *better* than that." I haven't noticed how close to the ground we are. The Oraxis slows smoothly as Jass lowers the controls, pushing them in and down to manage our landing. His actions are calm and confident, unhurried, as if he was never struggling to control the ship in the first place. As if... I shiver, horror crawling over my skin. *As if he was in perfect control all along.* He sets the Oraxis down in front of a sprawling glass complex placed strategically in amongst the spears of shining black rock that punch upward out of the moon's surface. The base looks state of the art, the high-domed ceilings of the structure tinted a subtle metallic silver, preventing us from seeing inside.

Jass kills the engines and slowly gets to his feet, rolling back his shoulders, as if he's sore after a boring, uneventful journey. He looks into my eyes, but there's no connection there. No feeling.

What the hell is happening? What the *fuck* is going on?

"This is the problem with you people," he says stiffly. "You keep telling me how good I am. That I'm *better*. But the problem is, I'm not. I am exactly who I am and have always been. Jass Beylar. I'm the bad guy, Reza. And bad guys do bad things. Shitty things. They let people down. They betray them at every turn. You really shouldn't be so surprised."

Surprised? Surprised doesn't even come close to describing how I'm feeling right now. Is he being serious? Does he really mean this? He's brought us here to hand us over to his superiors. Yes, he hates them, but he's being politically minded, playing the game so the odds work out in his favour? If he brings Col and I in and delivers us to Regis, they might eventually trust him again. A girl with the same powers Jass possesses would be very valuable to the Construct. And Col? Col was the adopted, much-loved son of Erika Pakka, one of the most revered leaders in the galaxy. He's bound to be a font of valuable information that Regis will want to tap and run dry. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have ever thought Jass was going to

truly cast aside his old life and join me in mine? I was such a fool, trying to make myself believe in fairy tales, because it was what I *wanted* to believe. I wanted to believe he could change. I wanted to believe that *he* wanted *me*.

The ground shakes, almost rattling the nuts and bolts right out of the Oraxis as The Nexus lands heavily in front of the glass research facility. How many soldiers are there inside that ship? A hundred thousand brainwashed madmen? Two hundred thousand? The ship is larger than my mind can truly comprehend. The Construct craft I served on, the Invictus, was large, but more of a stealth base, used for recon and tactical work. The Nexus is a city. A dark, black, ruined city, armed to the teeth with phase canons. It's an ugly, mean thing, a palace constructed from the nightmares of the oppressed. Even looking at it makes me want to bend over and throw up onto the threadbare, musty carpet beneath my feet.

Col gets to his feet and shoves his way past Jass, grabbing me by the arm. "Come on. If we can get into some suits before they disembark—"

"You'll what? Magically escape? Make your way off this floating shard of obsidian? Click your fingers and send out a distress call?" Jass must have been hurt earlier when he was fighting to pull me back in from hyperspace. A trail of blood runs from his temple, down the side of his cheek. He wipes at

it with the back of his hand, frowning at the scarlet smear that stains his skin. "You're never leaving this place. If you thought Pirius was a desert, you'll find Archimedes even more lifeless. But by all means, scramble into a suit and try to run. Regis loves a good hunt."

I wrench myself free from Col's grasp and fly across the cockpit. Jass' head kicks to the right when I slap him; the sound of my palm connecting with his cheek fills the space like the snap of a misfiring phase gun. Jass draws his bottom lip into his mouth, sucking on it. I want to do more than slap him. I want to kick his ass. I want to hurt him, the way he's hurting me right now. I want him dead.

"You lied to me back there on those sand dunes. You said you were going to try and help us, and you knew all along you were going to do nothing of the sort. Darius was wrong," I whisper. "He said he believed people were innately good. He said once the Light was out of your system, there was every chance you'd show your true colors. You were showing them all along, though, weren't you? You're rotten, right down to your very core. There's nothing inside you but a black, bottomless, cold, dark hole. I can't believe I almost fell head first into it." I shove him, slamming my palms into his chest, but Jass barely moves. The corner of his mouth quirks up—a fraction of a

smirk. The same smirk he wore constantly when we first met.

“Finally. You're getting it at last,” he says. “I kept trying to tell you. No one would listen, though. Funny how people will refuse to hear the truth simply because they want to believe in an alternative. Not very smart, Reza.” He brushes his fingers along the line of my jaw, his eyes a little hazy, and I can't stop myself. I reach out down the tether, and I fire as much energy at his newly resurrected shields, determined to bring them down. He wasn't expecting me to strike him like that. He can't have been, or he would have shored up his defences more efficiently. His shield splinters like glass, exploding into a thousand pieces. A million. More. Shock transforms Jass' face, but I'm not really paying attention to his reaction. I'm charging forward, lashing out, demanding the energy inside me to obey and come to my aid. I couldn't really access it before, but now I don't give it an option. I rip it clean out of me, hurling it at Jass. I'm hell-bent on making him pay for this. I put my trust in him. I believed him, and he played me for a fool. I put everyone I know in danger, because I gave a predator the benefit of the doubt. And he's right; he didn't even try to disguise the fact that he was a predator. He maintained the fact that he was dangerous from the moment we met, and I chose to overlook it...

If Col dies, it will be because of my complacency.

If the people of Pirius die, it will be because I ignored something that was staring me right in the face.

Forks of power surge from my mind, crackling and furious, reflecting my anger. They strike at Jass' mind—razor sharp barbs, clawing at him from the inside. I sense his pain, and his surprise. He tries to hide it, but I am a part of him now. The connection between us is unbreakable. I feel whatever he feels if I want to, and feeling the shock that volleys through him is satisfying to say the least. Jass tries to push me out of his head. He calls to the power I'm hurling at him, trying to turn its allegiance, trying to make it his own, but he should know better. He can't contain my power. He can only contain his own.

I'll rain napalm down inside Jass' head. I'll destroy him on an atomic level. There is a tempest brewing at the center of me, and I am ready to unleash it on the man I was almost foolish enough to fall in love with. He's flinching away from me, I can feel it. He's running from me for once. Col's hands are on my shoulders, trying to pull me back, but I'm free-falling, ready to submit, prepared to pay whatever grave cost must be covered in order to hurt Jass. I would push further, harder, until the job's done, but something catches my attention out

of the view port right ahead of me.

A series of heavy armored doors beneath The Nexus' hull lower slowly, yawning open until they hit the ground. Five? Six? Seven? I think there are eight doors, and Construct soldiers pour forth from them like a plague. Their black and gold uniforms make them practically invisible against the rocky midnight terrain of Archimedes. If it weren't for the small blue lights glowing at the top of each of their phase rifles, it would be impossible to tell how many of them there are. Enough to make me panic. Enough for me to allow my concentration to waiver for a moment. Jass seizes the opportunity, hurling me out of his head. I try to reengage him, but his shields are back with a vengeance. They're a meter thick this time, and made of reinforced steel instead of stone.

"I'm always going to be stronger than you," he says. "I've been honing this skill for cycles. You've done nothing but try and bury it. You were terrified of it. I *embraced* it. I have a mile wide head start on you. You're never going to be able to catch up. You might as well accept it and surrender."

His eyes are so black. The golden flecks that swirled and sparked in his irises when we were together less than twenty-four hours ago have disappeared. Not a single fibre of light remains now. It feels like Jass has been consumed by the beast that has been trying to devour him all this time.

Nothing remains of him except death and hunger.

In the distance, in front of the research facility, the Construct soldiers have formed into ranks and are marching toward the Oraxis with worrying speed. At the front of their column, a single tall figure leads, gold panels glinting off his shoulders. His face mask is striped with two panels of gold down its' sides, singling him out as a general. General Stryker. My blood runs cold in my veins.

Jass grunts quietly, and when I look back at him I can see my own horror reflected in his eyes. He's not afraid, though. It really is *my* fear, reflecting back at me, though him. He must be leeching it through the tether.

"He's a reasonable man, if you do what he asks," Jass informs me.

I've forgotten about Col. I've been so caught up with attacking Jass and then reeling from Stryker's presence, that I've left my friend standing on his own behind me. He barely registers as a blur as he rushes past me and throws himself at Jass, fists flying. Jass reacts, but his movements are so small and measured that they're barely observable. His index finger on his left hand twitches, and then Col careens backward. He hits a bulkhead, a loud crunching noise filling the air, his head tilted backwards, neck muscles straining, as if a sudden and unbearable pain has claimed him. His arms are wrenched back, flat against the wall, his hands

flexing and contracting, as if he's trying to wring Jass' neck and failing.

"You can kill me," Col wheezes. "But you'll never kill Reza. Your friends won't either. They'll try to crush her, make her...compliant," he grinds out, "but you'll never win her over. She'll kill you all in your...sleep. She'll come for you, Jass. From this...day forward...you'll never be safe."

Over my shoulder, down in the bowels of the Oraxis, the Construct soldiers have blown the loading hatch. The ship rocks violently, and yet Col remains where he is, pinned to the wall, suspended by the sheer magnitude of Jass' temper. Heavy footfall rings out through the ship, deafening, beating out a metronome of death. Jass' back straightens. He stands a clear three inches taller as Stryker's giant form appears through the cargo bay entrance. He stalks through the small, once-opulent passenger area, kicking chairs out of the way and upending a table in his haste to reach us.

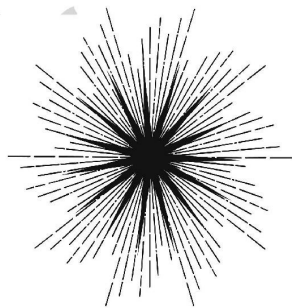
I brace for the man's hand around my throat, but it's Jass he grabs hold of first.

Jass allows himself to be manhandled, but I can feel his anger flickering like an open flame down the tether. "I knew you were rebellious, but your defiance knows no bounds, Jass Beylar," Stryker spits. He hits a button on the side of his face mask and the entire thing splits open, concertinaing together until it slides down into the steel-rimmed

collar around his neck. He's aged since I saw him last on the Invictus, but I'd recognize the man anywhere. Stryker has been a main feature in my nightmares ever since I left the Construct's conditioning center when I was a child. The hair at his temples is silver now, where once it was jet black. The rest of his hair is further streaked with silver, and much thinner than it used to be. He turns, casting a glance over his shoulder, as if he knows he's being studied, and I gasp at the sight of him. A long, jagged, ugly scar runs the length of his face, and his left eye is missing, replaced by a milky white implant with a target marker at its center in black.

I'm whisked away, taken back in time, back seven cycles, to the day the Invictus was attacked, and to Stryker trying to stop me from getting onto that escape pod. *I can feel his hand closing around my throat like a band of iron, tightening and tightening until even the smallest flow of oxygen cannot get through. My hand closes around the weighty handle of the phase cutter, and I slash out with it. The arc of light that flares out of the cutter is terrible. The smell of burning blood and singed flesh fills my nostrils...*

Stryker grins at me like he's just run into an old friend. "Well, hello there. What an unexpected surprise."



THIRTY-TWO

JASS

ARCHIMEDES

Five scientists meet us at the pressure lock, afraid and on their knees. They weren't expecting Stryker. More over, they weren't expecting *me*. I'm not dressed as I usually am when I visit Archimedes—I'm missing my Construct issue uniform—but the scientists of this station recognize me without any difficulty. Their innate sense of fear starts screaming like a klaxon as soon as I get within five feet of them. I've been stationed on Archimedes long enough that their hearts wither in their chests at the mere thought of me. Stryker's men shove me roughly from behind. I have to dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands to avoid tearing their heads off; I have a part to play here. If I act meek and repentant, Stryker will allow me back onto The

Nexus. He's a proud, arrogant man. If I play to his self-importance, he'll be so puffed up and pleased with himself that he'll overlook how oddly I'm behaving.

"Regis is going to be overjoyed when he realizes he has two runaways to play with," Stryker grunts. He's had a hold of Reza since we left the Oraxis and walked over the rugged, uneven terrain to get to the research facility's pressure locks. "I'm hoping he'll let me take care of *you*, though. Stupid little bitch. I'm thinking about taking one of those pretty eyes of yours. It's only fair." He pushes her forward, sending her sprawling onto the floor. She lands in a heap in front of the gathered scientist, who all recoil away from her like she's a venomous snake. A Construct guard shows Col the same treatment, sending him crashing to his knees next to Reza. His eyes flash with hate as he looks back at me over his shoulder. Stryker steps into my field of vision, blocking both Reza and Col out. "He's been waiting for an excuse to flay the skin from your meat for cycles, Beylar. I don't think I've seen him this excited since...well, *ever*."

I affect a casual smile, shrugging one shoulder. "I'm sure with a word or two from you, his most trusted second in command, I will be just fine."

"Why would I speak on your behalf?" he scoffs. The implant in his left eye socket whirrs as the black target marker locks onto five points

across my head and chest in quick succession.

"Because you're going to tell him you and I have been working together," I tell him. I'm calm, cool, and collected on the outside, but inside I'm a tightly wound piece of elastic, ready to snap any second. "I've been gathering information," I continue. "I've found out where they're based, where they've been hiding for decades. We can give the information to Regis together. Or, you can hand me over to him on a platter, beaten and missing fingers, and I'll tell him myself. What do you think he's going to do when he realizes I've been working to expand the glory of the Construct all this time, and you were completely oblivious?"

Stryker hawks, spitting at my feet. "You must think I'm completely stupid, Beylar. If you had that kind of information, you would have transmitted it to the Elders immediately."

"The place was a dead zone," I answer. "It was impossible to get a message out. And once we left the planet in that pleasure cruiser, I already knew you were locked on our coordinates and coming to intercept us."

Stryker frowns, muttering under his breath. He's a hard man. Fearless to the point of stupidity, though. Not a very smart man overall. "If you're telling the truth, you won't mind sharing the name of this planet, Beylar."

I hand it over without thinking twice. "Pirius.

The planet's name is Pirius."

"NO!" Reza's cry of anguish bounces around the research facility's high-ceilinged arrivals area, echoing off the thousands of panels of glass. The scientists, who still haven't said anything, get to their feet and stagger away from her, obviously wishing to put some space between themselves and the crazy, bound woman on the floor. "Jass! You're going to get them all killed. You've just signed their death warrants," Reza hisses. I've watched a thousand people die before. I've observed entire settlements being torched, razed to the ground. I've watched women kill their own family members, shooting each of them in the back of the head before the Construct members could get to them, to spare them the misery of being toyed with and tortured. I've been looked upon with hatred so many times in my life that I've become impervious to the emotion entirely.

But when Reza looks at me, her eyes burning with hatred, I really *feel* it this time. It hits me like a sledgehammer square in the gut, and I can't keep up this pretence. I've tried really fucking hard, but I just can't bear to have her look at me like that. I train my expression into one of nonchalance, but I create a tiny crack in my mental shield, reaching out for the tether. It's there, as strong as ever, glowing inside my head, but it feels as if there's no one on the other end of it. Like Reza has managed

to cut herself off from it completely.

She doesn't answer me when I say her name in my head. She doesn't say a word. I extend myself down the length of the connection, and I don't reach her until I hit the very end of it. She's clearly doing her best to put as much distance between us as she can.

"Reza. You're the worst actresses in the world," I say.

Stryker's nodding at me, suspicion all over his face, but he's telling me that he's going to take my suggestion into consideration. I split my mind in two, ingratiating myself to him at the same time I speak to Reza.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," I tell her.
"And I didn't want to hurt you. But I had to in order to make this believable. I've told you before, haven't I? You're terrible at hiding your feelings. You can't lie to save your own life. If I told you what I was planning, you'd never have agreed. You'd never have been able to keep the pretence up. Please...don't react." I might as well have left that part off the end. She's not reacting to my words at all. Her face is still a rictus of fury and betrayal. She's not listening to me.

"Reza. When The Nexus dropped out of hyperspace, I heard Regis' thoughts. He's been learning how to defend his mind the way you and I can for a long time now, but he let his guard down

for a moment. He didn't just get me hooked on the Light when the Construct took me. He also embedded a tracker into my genetic coding. That's why he let me go when I escaped The Nexus with Col. It was far more interesting for him to find out where I was going than stop me."

Reza's eyes flicker. I'm shouting down the connection, but I get the feeling my voice is little more than a whisper to her. She's doing an impressive job of shutting me out. She's hearing enough to make her relax her walls a little, though. Her brows bank together. I'm looking right at Stryker, nodding as he offers me more threats and warnings than I can truly stomach. Fuck him, though. I'm focusing on Reza's form in my peripherals. I catch every tiny twitch and move she makes.

"Regis couldn't track me to Piriuss, Reza. The sand storms blocked out the tracker's transmission. But once we hit open space, it began transmitting again. There's no way to pull it from me. There's no way to remove it from my body. It's a part of me now. Regis will always know where to find me. Which means, if we're together, you're always going to be in danger. I couldn't bear that."

"So you hand me over to them once and for all?" Reza answers. *"That's how you resolve the problem? I'm going to activate the nightcreeper*

Darius gave me. I'm going to end this."

"No! Reza, no. Don't do that. I have a plan. Archimedes isn't just a research facility. It's a prison facility, too. Regis keeps his most valuable, most dangerous, most volatile captives here. It's safer than The Nexus. No external atmosphere. No external gravity. If someone escapes, there's absolutely nowhere for them to go."

"Wonderful. So we'll be trapped here, being tortured and interrogated until we crack. Only it won't matter if we crack, because you already told Stryker about Pirius!"

"I'll have you out of here before anyone can lay a finger on you." I hope she can hear the sincerity in my voice. The idea of one of Regis' interrogators, men and women I trained, hurting her in any way makes me want to burn this whole fucking place down to the ground. It won't happen, though. I really will protect her. "I'll make sure the Pirians are safe, too. I'll make sure everyone gets out. I had to give Stryker something, otherwise this would never have worked. The people of Pirius are ready for revolution, anyway. Farren—"

"Farren's a murderer. He doesn't care about the people. He only cares about himself. He killed Col's mother. We both know he's the one who—"

"He didn't kill Erika," I say quickly. "I looked into his mind on the night he won the election. He didn't know who harmed the previous chancellor. I

accidentally slipped into someone else's mind that night, too, Reza. The person who really did commit the murder." I've been keeping this to myself for too long now. It's been weighing on me far more than I thought it would. "Darius. *Darius* killed Erika."

In the corner of my eye, Reza freezes. She was fighting against her restraints, struggling to wriggle her way out of the oversized spacesuit Stryker ordered her to wear, but now she falls as still as can be. "*Darius? You're...you're out of your mind,*" she hisses. "*Erika and Darius were best friends. There's no way he would ever have hurt her, let alone killed her.*"

"She asked him to do it. She saw what was coming, and she knew the people needed to be unified. She thought her death would be a catalyst for change. And it was. She was already dying, Reza. She didn't see it as losing her life, only... speeding the process up."

I send her my memories of Darius' thoughts. The scenes are blurry and confusing in places, but the final moments are very clear: Darius holding Erika in his arms, kissing the inside of her wrist and stroking her hair, then thrusting the ceremonial blade up into her stomach. She didn't scream. She didn't cry out. She held Darius' hand and spoke to him in hushed tones until she didn't speak anymore, and then Darius wept over her body until she went

cold.

Tears streak down Reza's face, out of control.
"How am I going to tell Col?"

"Concentrate, Reza. Stryker needs to see that you hate me. You despised me back on the ship, and you despised me when we entered the research facility. If that changes, he'll know something's wrong."

The man in question is barking orders at the scientists who are still grovelling on the floor. Construct soldiers hurry this way and that, their heavy military boots making a deafening din as they stomp around. Col's head is hanging, his body so limp that I begin to wonder if one of the soldiers knocked him out when I wasn't paying attention. He raises his gaze a second later, though, perfectly conscious and apparently desperate to rip my insides out.

"And so the devil returns to sit stop his throne in hell," he spits. "You're the worst kind of space trash, Beylar. You put my friends and family in danger. You caused me pain. But I hate you the most for taking away my faith."

Stryker seems interested in this exchange. He stops pacing and stands with his hands on his hips, waiting for me to reply to Col's claim.

Sighing impatiently, I flick my hand at Col. "Faith? Your faith in the universe is misplaced, Pakka. You're better off without it anyway."

“Not my faith in the universe,” he fires back. “*My faith in my mother.* I never called her visions into question. Not once. I followed her guidance blindly, because no matter what crazy, half-baked idea came to her, things always turned out exactly the way she saw them. But with you...” Col lets out a ragged, hoarse laugh, shaking his head. He closes his eyes for a moment, and when he opens them his eyelashes are wet with tears. “She was wrong about you. You were supposed to be our savior, Jass. You were supposed to be my friend. Instead, you’re going to be the damnation of the entire Commonwealth.”

I wish I could tell him otherwise. I wish I could argue with him and make him understand, as I’ve hopefully done with Reza. There’s too much on the line, though. It would take far more effort to speak into Col’s mind than Reza’s, and if the Construct’s warlord suspects I even care the slightest for Col, he’ll make sure he suffers a miserable and horrific end.

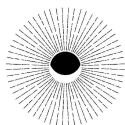
I look around, surveying the gathered soldiers until I find what I am looking for. “You,” I say, pointing at one of the men guarding Reza. “Give me those.”

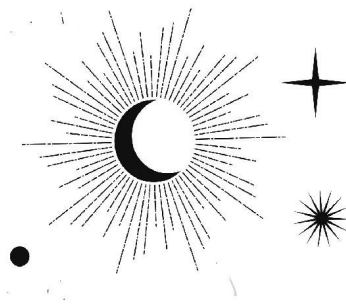
The guard looks down at his waist where I’m pointing and fumbles to pull out his gloves. He offers them to me with shaking hands. I ignore him and slide my hands inside the black leather, closing

my fists one at a time to stretch them out. Next, I remove the helmet from the soldier's head. Reza's eyes are wide and filled with tears as I slide the helmet down over my head, obscuring my face in what feels like a very final kind of way. I crouch down in front of Col, and I grab hold of his face, digging my fingers into his cheeks.

"I was never your friend, fool. And yes. Damnation, I will be. I'll help murder them all, and when Pirius is gone, I will scour the galaxy until every last Commonwealth fighter base is destroyed. But don't worry. You will be long dead by then." I stand and give him a stiff salute.

"One life, Col Pakka. One Duty. One Construct."





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Frankie Rose is the legal name of
USA Today bestselling author, Callie Hart.*

She is an obsessive romantic who loves throwing a dark twist into her stories. Her characters are imperfect, flawed individuals who dictate when she eats, sleeps and breathes. Frankie loves to travel, and often pens her books when she's on the road, drawing inspiration from her unique and wild surroundings.

If she's not writing, you'll undoubtedly find her with her nose buried deep in a book, or rewatching the Battle of the Bastards episode from Game of Thrones and screaming like a lunatic.